



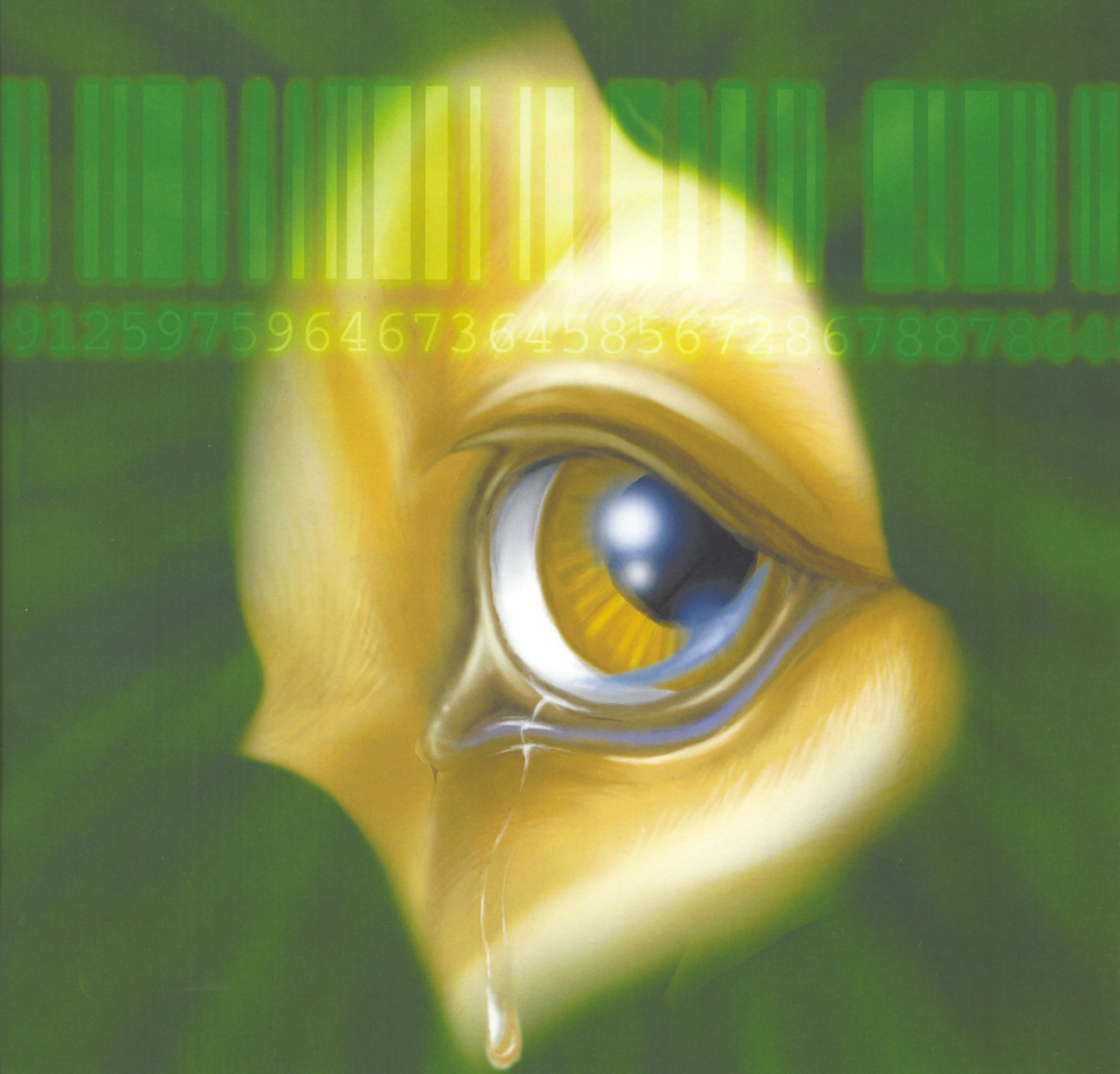
ANTHROLATIONS



The Magazine of Anthropomorphic Dramatic Fiction

Issue #6

November, 2002



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by Renee Carter Hall, illustrations by Claire Hummel



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Anthrolations welcomes submissions of fiction which feature anthropomorphic or zoomorphic characters, and explore their interaction with the characters and situations around them. The optimum story will be 3,000 to 5,000 words in length, but longer or shorter works will be considered contingent on available space. Preference is given to first-run fiction, but reprints will be considered if all applicable rights have reverted to the author.

We also welcome artists interested in preparing illustrations for accepted stories.

For more information about our guidelines and submission rates, or to purchase copies of our products, please refer to the Sofawolf Press web site.



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W

elcome to the sixth issue of

Anthrolations. Right off you probably noticed the stunning full-color cover, featuring the work of Claire Hummel and Jonathan Roth. Both artists turned out a brilliant effort, and we are all very proud of the result. Apart from looking really sharp, it will also allow us more freedom with cover design and allow us to stand out better.

But you certainly don't read *Anthrolations* for the pretty cover alone, and there is certainly no lack of good fiction and illustrations between the covers for us to be very proud of as well.

"Dog Days" is the first of many stories we hope to bring you from a relative newcomer to our fandom's publications, Renee Carter Hall. Rob finds himself without a clear direction after his first year away at college, but finds it in the heart and soul of his little brother's sentient canine companion during summer break. Claire Hummel provided the splendid artwork, and drew her inspiration for the front cover from the story's pages as well.

Issue #3 alumnus Andrija Popovic returns with another story in the same universe, with "Two Sick Days". Follow Josh through two days of cold-driven but self-inspired misery, as he finds the road to wellness leading him to unexpected conclusions. Fantasy illustrator Jonathan Roth brings the chaos to life throughout, and in full color on our back cover.

Notable TSA author Phil Geusz makes his first appearance in the magazine with a tale of a young werebunny who learns to be proud of his species. Jennie Hoffer picks up pen and ink and makes elevates the cuteness factor exponentially.

Elan Ruskin returns from his appearance in

last issue with a second alternate take on a traditional tale with "The Three Little Wolves", illustrated by Issue #4 alumni Amy Fennell.

Notable horror writer Michael R. Gist drops us into a circus sideshow during the off-season, where robbery and murder complicate the already complicated life of The Amazing Pan. Cara Mitten again brings a slice of the nightmare to life with her unique style.

Bringing down the house lights, we finish with "Morning After" by Arthur Lee. This is a delightful tale of serious upheaval in the lives of Felix de Molay and his pet husky Laika, and the ripple effect on the rest of society. Artist Jen "Spunky" Seng deftly captures the story's spirit and brings the characters' drama to life.

In the coming soon category we have the upcoming release of our best-of anthology *Best in Show*, which gathers together twenty-six of the finest published anthropomorphic stories to run in fanzines and on the web over the last fifteen years. It brings to fruition a project editor Fred Patten had been trying to initiate for several years, and is the first of its kind in the fandom.

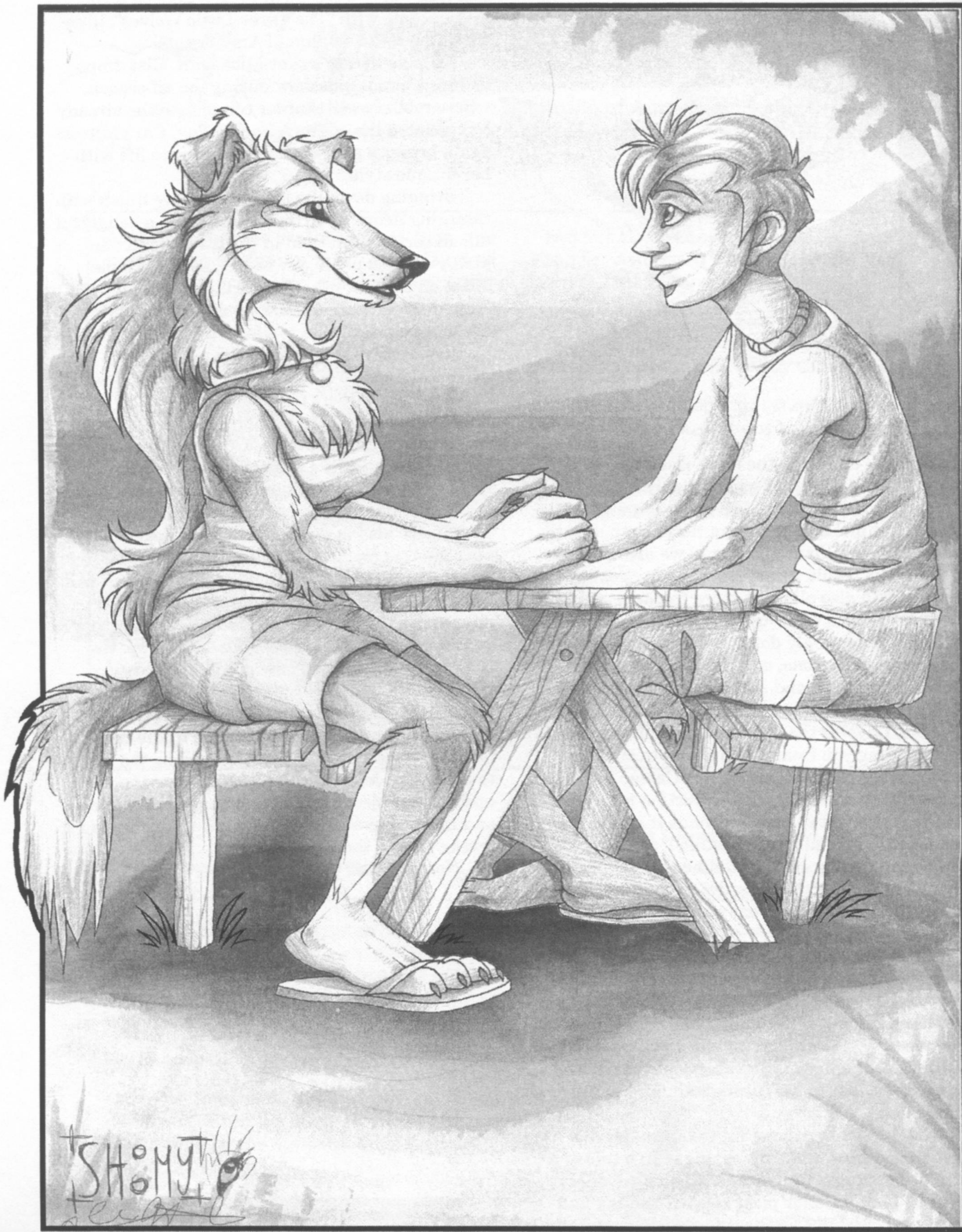
We are also in the final stages of development on a new magazine title, hopefully for release sometime in the second quarter of 2003. *Heat* will focus on stories of passion and romance which are too intense to make the *Anthrolations* rating guidelines, but are just too good to pass up. We have big plans for this new product. Watch our website for details.

Speaking of the website, we hope to finish testing on a message board feature in the coming months. Once we put it live, this will be the place to ask questions of the Press staff, hear about upcoming projects, comment on our publications, and maybe have a little fun too. We look forward to seeing you all there.

Now, on with the show!



[HTTP://WWW.SOFAWOLF.COM](http://www.sofawolf.com)



Dog Days

by Renee Carter Hall

illustrated by Claire Hummel

Renee Carter Hall's work has appeared in *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, *The Threshold*, and even a few small-press publications that still exist. She and her husband live in northern Virginia, where she is currently at work on a fantasy novel for children. She welcomes correspondence from readers at renjef@earthlink.net.

When not slaving over her easel (or sketchbook, for that matter) Claire is a Junior in high school, taking freelance commissions and working at neopets.com during school breaks. Most of her free time is spent drawing, developing her spirituality, and expanding her knowledge in: ancient & modern history, wild-life, nature, philosophy, and archaeology. More of her art can be seen at <http://yerf.com/hummclai>.

“Come on, Rob. You’ve gotta see her!”

I let Brian drag me into his room, which looked like even more of a disaster than usual. It used to be my room, but when I left for college I swapped with Bri. Made his century. His old room was small, but I figured if I could live in half a dorm room, I’d be okay anyplace.

At first I had my eyes on the floor, picking my way over the sharp, jumbled layer of toys that covered it. And then I looked up, and I saw her sitting on Brian’s bed.

So many thoughts flew into—and out of—my head. It was hard to do anything but stare. She was the first one I’d ever seen.

She was a collie. Or she was part collie. Or something that looked like a collie. I wasn’t sure how they bred them. Or made them...

“Her name’s Jenna,” said Brian. “Jenna, this is my brother Rob. You know, the one I told you about.”

“Yeah, well,” I managed, “don’t believe everything this squirt says about me.”

She smiled. “Nice to meet you.”

Her voice was quiet but bright, as though she were on the verge of laughing softly and kindly about something. Her eyes were bright, too—bright blue, an almost unnatural cerulean. She wore a short, sleeveless summer dress of the same color, her tail fanning out from a slit in the skirt. Silver sandals traced lines over her dainty white feet—well, paws. I found myself wondering if she had pads on her feet like a regular dog. Her hands were slender and lightly furred; she wore no jewelry other than a silver band around her neck. A small, thin disc dangled from the band, reflecting the light onto her brown-and-white fur.

“Isn’t she great?” Brian interrupted my observation.

“Yeah, sport, she’s pretty cool.” I felt weird talking like she wasn’t there, but she didn’t seem to mind.

“Brian!” Mom called from the living room. “Go get washed for dinner, and then come set the table.”

“Okay.”

And then Jenna and I were alone. She stood and started straightening up the bed, then picked up a few toys and put them away.

“So...” I didn’t know where to start. “What are you, exactly?”

She looked surprised. “I’m a SAC. Sentient Anthropomorphic Companion. Your parents accepted me from the agency a month ago.”

“No, I mean—what are you to us? A pet, a babysitter, a live-in nanny? A slave?”

“None of those, really. But parts of all of them.” She shrugged and tossed some dirty clothes onto a pile. “I’m a companion, so I do what I can. I help where I can.”

“Do Mom and Dad own you?”

She thought for a moment. “In a sense, yes, much like an adopted child is owned.”

“But could you leave if you wanted to?”

She looked slightly puzzled at that. “Why would I want to leave? I love your family. Brian’s especially close to me,” she added. “He’s really missed you since you’ve been away.”

“Really?”

“Of course. He’s always talking about you.”

“Good things?”

“You’re his big brother.” She picked up several crayons strewn over his desk and slipped them back into their box one by one. “He looks up to you. I can understand that.”

“Do you have a family?”

“Yes. Yours.” When I opened my mouth again, she added, “I’m engineered. I grew up—very quickly, by your standards—at the agency’s

complex. And so far, SACs haven't been able to reproduce naturally."

That kind of surprised me. She was obviously female—her breasts made gentle rising curves in her dress—but I wasn't about to ask if the equipment was all functional.

"So if you're not exactly a pet or a slave, then what's the collar for?"

She looked embarrassed. "It keeps me within the designated area. It's really unnecessary in my case, but I have to wear it anyway. Agency safety protocol."

"Sounds like you're a prisoner."

"I can see how you'd think that. But Brian can't go wherever he pleases, either."

"Bri's a kid. And you're an adult—aren't you?"

"Of course I am." She shook her head. "I told you, it's complicated. Anyway, I'm allowed one day a week off-system, when I can take this off," she touched the collar, "and go wherever I want."

There was silence then, and I felt kind of guilty about firing so many questions at her. It wasn't her fault I didn't know anything about the agency, or what a SAC was, or how anything worked. "Look," I said finally, "I don't mean to give you the third degree or anything. It's just that I've barely heard about SACs, and what I've heard on campus is all activist stuff."

She frowned slightly. "Activist stuff?"

Mom called us to dinner, and I continued as we went downstairs to the eat-in kitchen. "Like equal rights and that SACs are just animal slaves... but I never really got into any of that."

"Too busy partying, huh?" She didn't smile, but there was a playful gleam in her eyes.

"Bri told you *that*?"

She shook her head, then said softly, "I've heard your parents talking. They've been worried about you."

"Hey, it was only on the weekends." Mostly. Thank God I'd been able to pull through finals.

She gave me the same look that Kara used to give me: kind of disapproving, but not wanting to push it. Jenna's look was different in one way, though. It was like she wanted to say more but respected my choices even if they were stupid ones. That was something I'd never seen in Kara.

Kara... She'd said just before I left that she still loved me. She said that was why we had to break up. She couldn't just stay with me and watch me throw myself away on stupid parties and stupid friends and stupid binges. She wanted me to be more. And that was why she wanted out. She just didn't have anything else to give.

I'd like to say that it hurt, but it really didn't. I missed her, but I knew she was telling the truth, about everything. Hell, I didn't want me to be who

I was.

So the summer was going to be different. I was going to be somebody Brian could look up to. Maybe work for awhile, start over, rebuild myself. It was over with Kara; I didn't have any illusions about that. But in a weird way, I wanted the new me—or the old me, really, the way I was before I went away to school—to be kind of like a tribute to her, to how she kept trying until she couldn't try anymore. There was something noble in that, and I wanted to honor it.

Brian chattered away all through dinner, just like I remembered. How much fun the summer was going to be, all the stuff he was going to do, or I was going to help him do. I envied him. I envied the way the summer stretched so endlessly in front of him.

I looked across the table at Jenna. She was listening to Brian, but then she looked at me, smiled, and glanced away again.

"Well," Dad said, when he was finally able to get a word in, "we've got two weeks off starting Saturday. What do you say we go up to the lake and stay at the cabin for a while."

"All *right*!" That set Brian off again. "You'll love it, Jenna, it's so cool. We can go swimming, and fishing, and—you can swim, can't you?"

"Dog paddle." She smiled at me as she said it.



Some things really don't change. The cabin was just the way it had always been, all those summers past. We called it a cabin, but really it was more of a huge A-frame chalet, with big porches and lots of windows to reflect the lake. The pine trees around the lake were a little taller, but that was the only change.

There wasn't much sun left—it had been a long drive up—but the evening was warm. I tossed my clothes in the dresser, dug out my swim trunks and a towel, and walked the length of the wooden dock. Jenna was sitting at the end, her legs dangling. She was wearing a purple one-piece suit—and the collar, of course.

"It's so quiet," she breathed as I sat next to her. "It's beautiful."

"Yeah, it is." I touched the disc on her collar. "Is that thing waterproof?"

She nodded.

"Well, what're you waiting for?" I dove in, surfaced, and looked up at her.

She laughed and jumped in. I swam out to the platform that was moored farther out in the lake. When I climbed up the little algae-slick ladder, I looked back and saw Jenna following. Dog paddling, just as she'd said.

I laid on my back and looked up at the sky. The sun was down, and a few stars were starting

to come out. I was just wishing I'd thought to put on mosquito repellent when I felt the platform bob slightly, and Jenna climbed on.

I couldn't help chuckling.

"What?"

"Nothing," I said. "You just..."

"I just what?"

"Well, if you must know, you look like a drowned rat."

She grinned and shook herself, splashing me. "How's that?" She laid down beside me and sighed.

"So Mom and Dad were worried about me?" I asked finally.

"Yeah. About your grades, and that they spent more time talking to the answering machine than to you."

"I answered their e-mails. Sometimes. Besides, I was busy. I had a life."

"Did you?" It wasn't a challenge, the way she said it, but an honest question.

"Well, I thought I did. Maybe I didn't have the right one."

There was a pause. "You didn't answer Brian's e-mails, either."

That stung. I didn't say anything else for awhile. I thought about getting back in the water, but decided not to. "What was it like, where you grew up?"

Jenna thought for a moment. "Busy. They would call it efficient. And sterile. Not crowded, since there still aren't many of us at any one time. Each one of us had an assigned caregiver, so we got a lot of attention."

"Do people ever accept... um... children? From the agency?"

"Only in special cases. There are still a lot of things to work out. And most people want regular children, anyway."

"I was wondering..." I stopped. It didn't seem like the kind of question I should ask.

"What?"

"Well... If you were for Brian, why didn't Mom and Dad get... Why a female?"

"Most SACs are female right now. It's harder to engineer males, and so far, female temperaments are better for a SAC's purpose." Her voice was quiet.

After that, we just laid there for awhile, enjoying what I call lake silence, the kind that isn't empty but full of peace and owls calling softly and the velvet wrap of the darkness. And then, when it got too late and too cold, we swam back to the

dock, towed off, and went inside.



"Rob?"

A knock on the door.

I squinted into the bright sunlight. I'd forgotten to close the blinds the night before, and my room was flooded with morning sun.

The door opened, and Jenna peeked in. I grabbed for the sheets—at least I'd worn my boxers to bed. She smiled. "Morning, sunshine. Breakfast is ready."

I took a quick shower and threw on cutoffs and a tank. If it had just been my family, I would have gone down in boxers and maybe a shirt, but I wasn't quite that comfortable with Jenna yet. And I wasn't sure I wanted to be.

Breakfast certainly was ready: blueberry pancakes, bacon, eggs, toast, coffee, fresh juice... I don't know whether it's the vacation time, the fresh air, or the huge kitchen, but Mom tends to go a little overboard with breakfasts at the lake.

I noticed Jenna wasn't wearing the collar. "Day off?" I asked, gulping my juice.

She looked up from her mug of tea. "My first one. I was thinking about going into town for a while."

Dad stirred more sugar into his coffee. He drank the stuff sweet enough to attract hummingbirds. "I don't know if that's a good idea."

"Why not?" I asked.

"This is a very quiet little town. I don't know if any of them have seen a SAC before. They might not be entirely friendly."

"I could go with you," I offered, looking back at Jenna. "I mean—if you don't mind, with it being your day off."

"I don't know..." Dad started.

"Dad, come on. I can take care of myself."

"Well, then it's up to Jenna."

"I think I'd like the company." She smiled at me, and I found myself smiling back.



The town was old and, as Dad had said, very quiet and small, but it was still kind of an interesting place. We parked the car in a field that was half grass and half gravel, then started exploring, strolling by a grocery store, a pharmacy, a pizzeria, and a video store with sun-bleached posters of last year's movies.

Finally we wandered down to the end of the

street, to the houses that some people had made into shops. A couple were junk shops masquerading as antique emporiums. Another sold cheap T-shirts and souvenirs.

The last was a used book store. I pushed the screen door open and held it for Jenna. Inside it had that particular smell of old books—kind of musty and warm but not bad. A fan in the window was trying to stir the air, but it wasn't having much effect. I glanced at the guy behind the counter. He stared at Jenna for a moment but, to his credit, didn't say anything.

We browsed through the books for a while. A lot of them were bad horror novels or worse romance novels—dime a dozen stuff. Beside me, Jenna gave the fantasy section a once-over.

I managed to find a few poetry books tucked into the corner of one shelf, strangely next to the cookbooks. Jenna glanced my way.

"I didn't know you read poetry."

I took down a slim volume and leafed through it. "Yeah, well, it wasn't something I was going to advertise to my friends. Their concept of poetry doesn't go beyond X-rated limericks."

"Do you write any? And I don't mean the limericks," she added, seeing me about to reply.

I slid the book back onto the shelf. "I used to write a little. Trying to be the next great poetic drunk, I guess. Mostly it was just stupid stuff for my girlfriend."

"I bet she liked it."

I shrugged. "I guess she did. She never really said anything about it."

"Maybe you should ask her."

"It isn't that easy. Besides, we broke up."

"Oh," she said softly. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

We left the store. Outside, clouds of gnats swarmed around us. My shirt was sticking to me from the humid heat, and Jenna was panting slightly—an odd sound that I couldn't help defining as erotic. I tried to ignore it as we got back into the car, but finally I asked, "So, is it hot in that fur coat of yours?"

"A little. But at least I don't have to worry about using sunscreen."

"That's handy. I usually get burned at least once every summer." I turned up the a/c and drove along the curving roads back to the cabin. We settled into a surprisingly comfortable silence. When we got back, Brian was splashing in the shallows; Dad was watching him from the porch.

"Come on, you guys!" Brian called.

Jenna glanced at me. "I'm going to take a walk for a while. Should I be back for lunch?"

"Nah. We fend for ourselves until dinner. Sandwiches or whatever. Well—see you later."

She nodded and left. I went inside, put my suit on, and played with Bri for awhile, racing him out to the platform, splashing around, whacking each other with those styrofoam noodles—he really got a kick out of that one.

"Why didn't Jenna come in?" Brian asked as I rested up for another battle.

"It's her day off. She probably wants a break from us." Even as I said it, though, I couldn't help feeling a little hurt myself. I mean, of course she could do whatever she wanted. She didn't have to be with us all the time. Still, I had to admit, I kind of missed her.

When both Brian and I were tired and wrinkly, we dried off and went inside. Brian went to watch TV, and I threw a sandwich together and went out to the back deck to eat. Jenna was lounging in one of the deck chairs, reading something on one of those palmscreen things.

"Hey, Jen. Want something to eat? I could make you a sandwich." The offer surprised even me. The old me hadn't been the oh-don't-get-up type.

She shook her head, not taking her eyes off the screen. "I'm not hungry."

I noticed then that she was blinking back tears. "What's wrong?"

"It's someone I knew. A friend from the agency. A bulletin about her."

"Did something happen?"

Jenna nodded. "She was placed with a young couple, not long before I was accepted. They wanted her to take care of their baby. But I guess money got tight, so they sold her."

"Can people do that?"

"No." Her voice broke. "It's illegal. There aren't any screenings that way. It was all black market."

"Who'd they sell her to?"

"An underground SAC brothel. They're—the agency's trying to find her, but..."

"You mean people do that? Turn them into—into sex slaves or something?"

She nodded, tears spilling over.

"How can they do that?" I wondered out loud. "You're *people*—you can't just be bought and sold like—hey. Hey, it's okay." I went to her and held her. "It'll be okay. They'll find her."

She sniffled for a few minutes, her shaky breaths mixed with animal whimpers. Finally she pulled away. "I'm sorry..."

"It's okay."

"It just never really mattered to me—the activists and everything. I'm here, with your family, and everything's wonderful. But so many things could happen..." She glanced down at the handheld's screen, then turned it off. "What's going to happen when Brian grows up? Where do I go

then?"

"Jenna, you know Mom and Dad would never sell you."

"I know. But even if I just went back to the agency..."

"That's all a long time from now. Maybe by then you'll be a free citizen. Maybe there'll be laws so that Mom and Dad could legally adopt you or something. You could get a degree, get a job, get married. All kinds of things could happen."

She nodded but didn't look reassured.

"Listen," I said, "I'll get lunch for you, and we'll walk down to a place I know, okay? Kind of a picnic."

"Okay."

Once I had the lunches packed, I grabbed them and my beach bag and met Jenna on the deck, then led her out through the backyard. The yard soon gave way to a scattering of trees, and I followed the path I'd found years before—just the hint of a trail—that led around to a sheltered corner of the lake. An ancient-looking picnic table sat in the dappled shade. I brushed off the dead leaves and tested it. "Looks like it'll hold for another season. Have a seat."

She sat down and unwrapped her sandwich, nibbling at the crust. "I try not to think about it," she said finally. "I know it's a long time away. But..."

She shrugged, and we ate in silence for awhile. Finally she glanced in her bag and pulled out one of Mom's famous chocolate chip cookies.

"But you don't have one," she said, looking at my crumpled paper bag.

"It was the last one. Mom'll probably make more tomorrow. Um—you can eat it, can't you?" I remembered reading somewhere that chocolate was bad for dogs.

"Sure I can. I'm glad, too—I'd hate to live without chocolate." She broke the cookie in two and handed half to me.

"Well, okay." The chocolate chips had kind of melted, and the whole cookie was warm from the sun. I washed it down with the last of my soda, then reached into the beach bag I'd brought and took out my journal. It was a slim, leather-bound one, with gilded edges and my initials embossed on the cover. My aunt had given it to me for graduation.

I handed the journal to Jenna. "I thought maybe you might want to read... I mean, if you wanted..."

"I'd love to. If you're sure it isn't too personal."

"It's okay." I watched her open the journal, then walked down to the lake and tried to skip stones while she read. Every one I tried just splashed straight in, though. I've never been able

to get the hang of it. Of course, wondering so much about what she would think of my poems didn't help my concentration.

Finally, after approximately seven years, I heard her behind me. I held my breath and turned to get her reaction.

"Rob, these are wonderful." She smiled, looking like she'd be blushing if she were able. "I especially liked the one about the gumballs."

Now I blushed. I'd forgotten that one was in there—comparing Kara's clitoris to the fun surprise of getting your favorite red gumball out of the machine. "Well, the red ones were always my favorites," I managed.

She hesitated, then said, "It must have been hard to break up with her."

"Not really. I don't know why." I paused, then shrugged. "I think I loved her not for her, but for what she was to me, you know? I loved her because she was my girlfriend."

"Shouldn't it be the other way around?"

"Usually." I plopped another stone into the still water. "Anyway, you can see what you and me have in common. I don't have any real clue about what's going to happen to me, either, or what I'm going to be doing for the rest of my life."

"You're free to make your own choices, though," Jenna said softly.

"In theory. But there's always something. I mean, there's money, and family, and what people expect of you... You can't just choose and make everything happen."

"I thought this was the time in life when you're supposed to feel like the whole world's open to you." Jenna skipped a stone, perfectly, over the water. I tried not to glare at her.

"I guess I'm a realist, then."

"Or maybe you're just jaded." But her eyes sparkled as she said it.

"Maybe."

We went back to the house after that and hung around until dinner, mostly watching dumb sitcoms on TV. One of them featured a ditzy SAC poodle. Jenna and I raised eyebrows at each other and changed the channel.

I couldn't believe how comfortable I suddenly felt with her. I thought back to that morning, even, and tried to figure out just when things had changed. Maybe it was when she'd started crying, and I had tried to comfort her? Was that when her feelings became such a big part of my thoughts? I couldn't figure it out. After a while, I stopped wanting to.

After another day or so, it got to where just the way she *looked* at me—kind of flirty without being really serious about it—excited me. Not in a sexual way, though I realized that was part of

it, but the old-fashioned butterflies-and-pounding-heart way. I didn't know if she was feeling any of it, but I thought she probably was. Had I been sleepwalking the whole time I was dating Kara? I must have been, because I didn't remember anything like this.

Another evening came. Brian was inside getting ready for bed; Jenna and I were sitting out on the platform, our feet in the water and eyes on each other.

"I saw a deer this morning," Jenna said idly.

"Yeah?"

"A buck. On the other side of the lake." She sighed. "I envy animals. They're so much freer than anyone, and..."

"And?"

She looked down at the water. "They know what they are. It's not like being half-and-half, and not looking like you belong anywhere..."

"I think you're beautiful." I laid my hand over hers. I couldn't stand not knowing anymore, and there wouldn't be any better time... "Jenna?"

"Mm?"

"What... What are we, to each other? I know we're friends, but I... I know we're closer than that. I feel like we are, anyway, and maybe I'm just imagining everything, but..."

"You're not," she said, so softly that I almost couldn't hear her.

"So what are we? Where are we?"

"We're together. Right here." And she leaned closer to me, and I moved closer to her, and her short, soft muzzle met my lips.

If I could describe that kiss, exactly, in words, my poetry would win hundreds of awards. But instead, the best I can say is that it was like I hadn't had a body or a soul until that moment.

We kissed again, then again, her soft tongue hesitantly touching mine, going deeper and more intense each time. Then she pulled away and looked back at the water.

"Rob, we can't." Her voice was hoarse, and I could tell she was trying not to cry. "*We can't.*"

"No one can see us."

"That's not what I meant. We can't *do* this. We can't feel like this."

"It's too late."

She hugged me, almost desperately, her damp fur cool against my skin. I held her, and we kissed, slowly, until we were breathless and my skin

prickled with goosebumps. I could feel myself getting hard, and after a few minutes she was whining, longingly, under her breath.

"I should go in," she said finally. "Brian likes me to read to him."

I summoned the last of my courage, trying to be bold and light at the same time. "Will you come tuck me in, too?"

She gave me a slight smile and shook her head, then climbed down the short ladder and slipped into the water.



It took me a long time to fall asleep that night. I kept wondering if I'd screwed everything up with that last stupid question. And I kept replaying those moments in my mind—the cool, quiet twilight around us, the warmth of her mouth, her body, against mine.

I woke up without knowing why. It was still dark, probably the middle of the night, but there was a streak of light across my room. I rolled over. My door opened slowly, and a dim glow spilled in from the nightlight in the hall.

Jenna closed the door carefully behind her, then slipped into bed. I tried to think of something to say, but couldn't.

"Your parents," she whispered, "Brian—will they hear?"

"Mom and Dad are all the way at the end of the hall." I paused to kiss her, and she moved closer to me. "And Brian can sleep through anything." Her fur tingled against my chest. "Jenna, before we do anything—I love you. You don't have to... we don't have to..."

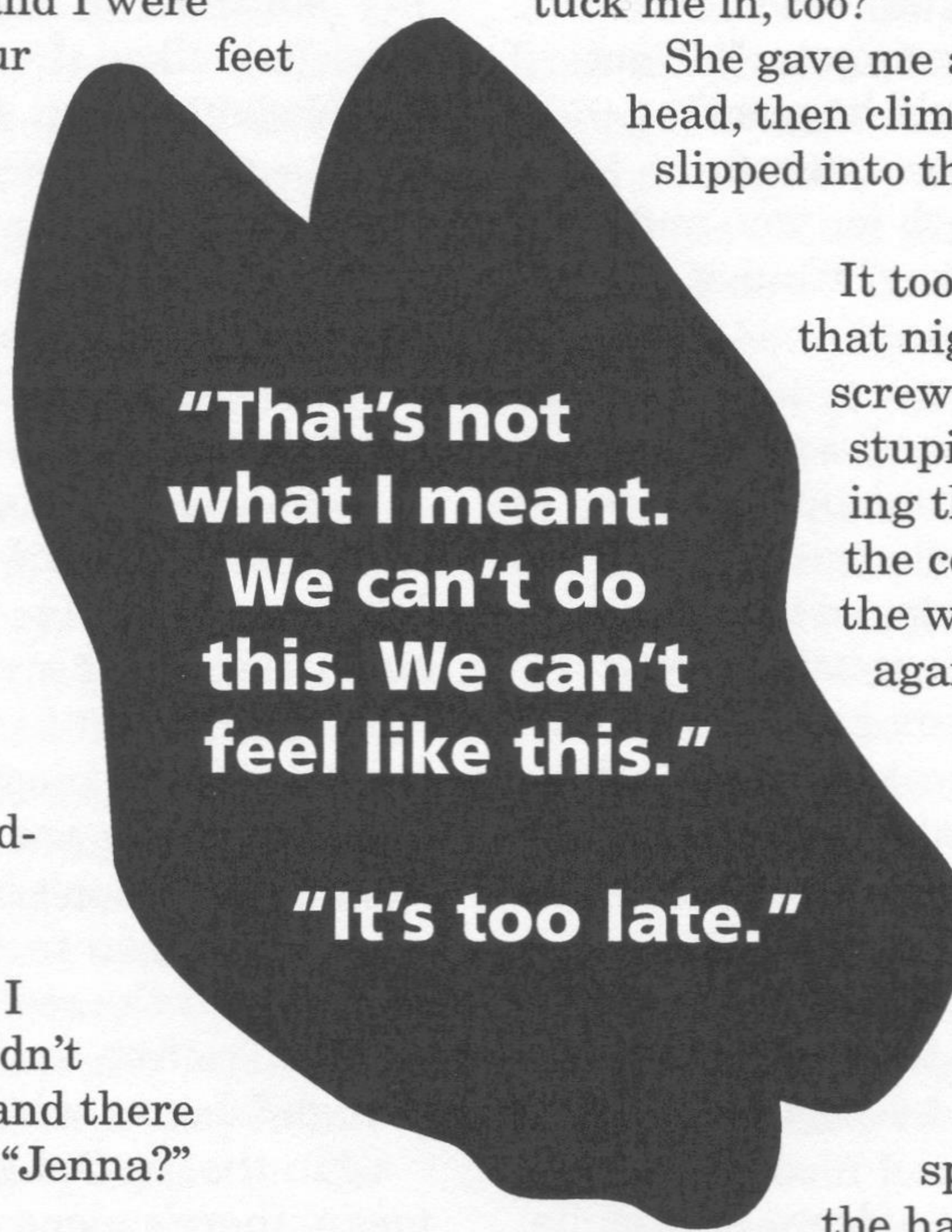
"I know that." She pulled away and stripped off the lacy white tank top she'd been wearing. The matching panties came off just as easily. "I want to," she murmured, pressing against me. "I love you, and I want to."

And everything after was touch and breath, gasp and ache, discovery, surrender, and arrival.



When I woke the next morning, she had already gone back to her room. I might have wondered if the whole thing had been a dream, except for the brown-and-white fur dusting the pillowcase. I took a shower and dressed, then found a lint roller in the bathroom cabinet and ran it over the sheets.

It was like being awake for the first time.



Sunlight gilded the breakfast nook, shimmering over the silverware. The orange juice was cold and sweet, the sausage gravy spicy and thick, the home fries crisp and hot. Everything glowed and dazzled—and when Jenna glanced at me, almost shyly, from across the table, I knew it was the same way for her.

After breakfast, Jenna went to play video games with Brian in the rec room, and I went out to the deck with my journal. For what felt like hours, I tried to write a poem about the night before, about seeing her revealed in the almost-dark, about how it felt to be with her. But I couldn't find the right words, and I ended up tearing the page out and throwing it away.

When I came back inside, Dad was watching the morning news in the living room. Their lead story caught my attention: a rally for SAC citizenship rights being held in Eaverton, a medium-sized city several hours away.

"Dad... What do you think about that?"

I had some idea of what his answer would be, and I wasn't disappointed.

"I think it's a waste of time."

He got up and went into the kitchen to refill his coffee. I followed. "Why's it a waste of time?"

"Because people like that don't understand how the world works. All they can see is how they *wish* it worked. I wasn't raised to ask the world to change just for me. Didn't raise you that way, either."

"But the SACs—don't you think they should be free?"

"They're companions. What would be the point? What do they need that they don't have already?"

"What would happen to Jenna, if something happened to us?"

He sighed, then answered as if humoring me. "She'd go back to the agency and be placed with someone else."

"But she wouldn't have any say in who she was placed with."

"No need. They're all screened."

"What if she doesn't want to be a companion?"

He gave me a wry smile. "That's like you saying you don't want to be human."

"But it's like she's just *property*..."

"Rob. We're not talking about a person here. We're talking about creatures that are scientifically engineered for specific purposes..."

"You got Brian through in vitro. What does that make him?"

"Lower your voice." I could tell he'd gone from slightly annoyed to seriously angry in a matter of seconds. "I don't know why you're so involved in this all of a sudden, but you're wasting your time

just like those people. Jenna is perfectly happy here... There's no reason for that to change, and there's no reason for you to start stirring up trouble. Am I clear?"

I didn't bother to answer. As I walked back into the living room to go downstairs, I caught the last part of the news story.

"The group has planned another rally for tomorrow afternoon."



"I don't know, Rob. We can't just leave."

Jenna and I were in the rec room. Brian had gone out on the lake with Dad, but we'd stayed inside. We had been playing one of Brian's video games, this weird quasi-martial arts adventure thing, but now the controls were lying ignored in our laps and the music played over and over, with occasional sound effects as our characters got beaten up by wandering adversaries.

"Why can't we? I e-mailed this guy from school—he's going, and he said he could pick us up on the way."

"You know it's not that simple."

"I know. But it's a chance to feel like we're doing something, at least."

She sighed. I put my arm around her shoulders, loving how she snuggled next to me. "Well," I said, "think about it. If you want to, he'll be by early in the morning. I told him if we weren't waiting for him at the main road by five, he should go on without us. Okay?"

"Okay."

I tilted my face to hers and kissed her, slow and long. "Jenna... Last night was... I can't even..."

She smiled. "I know."

"Robert James Chapman!" Dad's voice thundering from upstairs.

"I guess they're back," Jenna said, surprised. "What'd you do?"

I got up. "Probably left a screen door open somewhere. He loves to gripe about how much the a/c costs for this place."

When I got upstairs, Dad was sitting at the kitchen table with a piece of half-crumpled paper in front of him.

The page from my journal.

I felt like banging my head against the nearest wall. How could I have been that stupid? I should have ripped it up into tiny pieces, or flushed them, or burned them, or...

Dad looked up at me with an expression that could have easily cooled the whole house for a month. "Did this actually happen, or is this some kind of sick adolescent fantasy?"

I recovered enough to form a reply. "Either way, is it any of your business?"

"Anything that goes on in this house is my

business." His voice was low and firm. "I don't expect you to tell me the truth about this. But you'd better forget all of it right now. You should be thinking of her as your sister."

That was a good one. Which side of the family did she get the excessive facial hair from? I picked up the page, folded it carefully, and slipped it into my pocket. When Dad realized I wasn't going to say anything else, he got up and left the room. I kept clear of him for the rest of the day, and at five the next morning, when the car pulled to the side of the main road, Jenna and I got inside.



"They'll think we're running away together," said Jenna. It was the first time she'd spoken since we got in the car. We'd been on the road for almost five hours.

Matt glanced at us in the rearview mirror.

"Aren't you?"

"Sort of," I replied.

"Sure you are," said Matt. "You're on your way to take a stand for your right to love each other, to be free to love each other."

Matt was a friend of a friend, a few times over, from college. His most distinguishing characteristic was that he was born into the wrong generation. He was a full-fledged flower-in-the-gun-barrel peacenik throwback, but he had a way of being weirdly idealistic that was endearing instead of irritating, and just about everybody on campus liked him.

"Thanks for helping us out," I said. "We'll give

you some money for gas." Jenna had been saving the money from her weekly stipend; we'd brought it along.

"Out of her slave wages?" Matt shook his head. "Don't worry about it."

I looked back at Jenna. She was nervously rubbing the fur at her throat where her collar had been. "Feeling okay?" I asked.

She nodded. "It stopped not long after we left."

The collar had been a problem. As it turned out, only Mom and Dad had the codes to deactivate it. On our way to the road to wait for Matt, we passed the perimeter line and Jenna got hit with dizziness, nausea, and low-level electrical pulses. We were just thinking we'd have to give up when Matt showed up with a device that could turn the collar off. We'd tossed it into the underbrush, not caring if anyone found it.

Matt glanced back at us again. "Almost there, guys. We'll go to Rick's place—he's the guy organizing the whole thing. We'll get something to eat then. I don't know about you two, but I'm starving."

He cranked up the radio then, blasting a song about summer and freedom and what it was like to be in love, *really* in love, for the first time. I glanced at Jenna, placed my hand over hers, and smiled. After a moment, she smiled back, and the car sped into the city.



Rick's place was a studio apartment, its classiest feature being that it had four walls

and running water. Rick wasn't around, so Matt told us to make ourselves at home while he went out to grab some food.

I sat down on the couch next to Jenna. When I was sure it would hold our weight, I put my arm around her shoulders.

"Maybe we should call them," she said.

"We'll call afterwards. They'll just want us to come home." I paused. "Jen... Do you want to go back?"

She thought, then shook her head.



Illustration by Claire Hummel

"No. Like you said, we'll at least feel like we've done something."

She reached into the overnight bag we'd brought and took out the sonic brush she used between shampoos. Slowly she worked the bristles through the soft fan of her tail.

"And," I added, "hopefully by the time we get back, they'll have gotten used to the idea of us being together."

"They'll have to get used to it." She brushed her arms and legs, then handed the brush to me. "Do my back?"

She unbuttoned the sleeveless white shirt she was wearing and slipped it off her shoulders. I stroked the brush through her silky fur, breathlessly wondering what area she'd ask me to do next.

A key turned in the lock. Jenna pulled her shirt back on and finished buttoning it as three people entered: Matt, carrying a grease-soaked fast food bag; another guy, sharper and bonier, who I figured must be Rick; and last, a SAC, a slender dalmatian in a red halter top and black leather miniskirt.

Jenna's eyes widened. "Sandy?"

Before she'd even finished saying the name, the two were halfway through their second hug. Jenna turned back to me. "Rob, this is... I thought she was..."

"I was," Sandy said, so quietly I almost didn't hear her.

"We've got informants in some of the brothels," Rick spoke up. "We do what we can to get them out."

"It must have been horrible," said Jenna.

Sandy sat down on a moth-eaten floor cushion. "I don't want to talk about it." She glared at Rick.

"People have to know what's going on." Rick said it like she'd heard it a hundred times. "Too many people don't even know that SACs are being sold to these places."

"You want me to get up in front of God knows how many people and talk about what they did to me? Where should I start? With the first time I was raped? Or should I cut to the chase and talk about the night I almost got beaten to death because I didn't swallow during a blowjob? Maybe I shouldn't even give a speech. Maybe I should just let you guys put a full description with photos on your website for the whole damn world to see." She was almost crying by the time she finished. She walked into the kitchen and poured a glass of

water, her hands shaking.

"He was the cutest baby," she said, as if to herself. "I loved taking care of him. I loved him. He was so good, he hardly ever cried, and I fed him and sang him to sleep, and Jim and Laura were so nice to me, and it was like we were a family, a real one, and..." She was quiet for an instant,

then whirled, threw the glass against the wall, and turned her back to us. In the silence, we could hear her choking back sobs.

Jenna went to her. Matt sighed and tossed me a wrapped egg-and-cheese biscuit. "Breakfast is served."

I didn't feel like eating, but I managed to chew and swallow until it was gone. While I sipped at the black coffee that came with it, Jenna coaxed Sandy into eating. I could tell Rick wanted to say something, but he kept his mouth shut.

Finally Sandy turned to him.

"You're right. If somebody doesn't say something, it'll keep happening." She looked at Jenna, and there was envy in her voice. "Looks like you did a lot better."

While the others took down a few notes on Sandy's speech, Jenna came back to me. "Rob, we really should call. We should at least let them know we're okay. We don't even have to tell them where we are."

I'd like to say that my noble conscience recognized that as the right thing to do, but to be honest, I gave in for her sake. I picked up the phone in the kitchen, being careful to avoid the broken glass on the floor.

It felt like forever before somebody picked up. Dad, unfortunately. "Where the hell are you?"

"Dad, it's okay, we're..."

"Where's Brian? Let me talk to him."

My stomach clenched. "Brian? But... isn't he there?"

There was a brief silence, a briefer conversation in the background, and then Mom came on. "Honey, we can't find Brian. We thought you took him with you."



I sat down on the couch, only half-aware that, like Sandy before, I had everyone's attention. I must have told them something, because suddenly Jenna was there, and I was breathing in her faint, sweet musk and holding on to her tighter than I'd ever thought I could, and all I could think of was



**She
looked at
Jenna, and
there was envy
in her voice.
"Looks like
you did a lot
better."**

that we never should have left, that Dad was right and I should have thought of Jenna as my sister, except that it was too late for that, too late for everything now...

"We have to go back," said Jenna.

Rick leaned against the kitchen counter, arms crossed. "So Lassie goes back to save Timmy, huh?"

"You don't understand a damn thing," I snapped. "He's my *brother*."

"You have to go back," Sandy spoke up. "She doesn't. Probably it's better if she doesn't. I know what happens to SACs who aren't good enough for their owners anymore."

"That's the question, then," said Matt. "Jenna, what do you want to do?"

"We've got plenty of people who would give you a place to stay, even some work to do, if you don't mind dishes or housework," said Rick. "We've got about twenty other SACs doing the same thing now, speaking out with us, helping the cause."

Jenna was probably only silent for a minute or two, though of course it didn't feel that way to me. Finally she looked at Sandy, then at Rick, then Matt, and by the time her eyes met mine, I knew she'd decided.

"I have to go back, too."

Matt tossed me the keys to his car. "I'll catch a ride back down eventually."

"Thanks."

"You guys need any cash?" Rick reached for his wallet, but I stopped him. "Well," he said finally, "take care of yourselves, then. And I hope he's okay."

I nodded, and we left. Halfway back, we ran into a storm so bad the wipers couldn't keep up, and it didn't look like it was going to let up anytime soon. I wanted to keep going, but it was getting dark, we were both exhausted, and when the wipers threatened to give out entirely, we pulled into a cheap motel for the night.

In the room, I called the cabin again. A police officer answered, and that really stopped my heart, but then I talked to Mom and let them know where we were and that we were on our way.

"Have they found him?" Jenna asked when I hung up.

I shook my head.

There was a bright flash of lightning, and the lights flickered and went out. I sighed as the thunder crashed and faded. "Guess we should get some sleep."

We didn't bother to undress, didn't even turn down the bed. We lay curled against each other, listening to the wind pelting raindrops against the windows.

"They'll send me back to the agency."

"Hmm?" I had dozed off.

"They'll send me back to the agency," she repeated.

"We don't know that."

"What else could they do? I was supposed to look after him."

I stroked her back. "It's my fault."

"What, for seducing me?" She chuckled dryly. "I came to your room, remember?"

"I ran off because I was mad, and I dragged you along, when we both should have just stayed and dealt with it. Brian was probably trying to follow us."

I held her closer. Here I was, trying to be a whole new person, and it turned out that the new me was just as much of an impulsive jerk as before.

"Jenna," I said finally, "listen. If they send you back, if they want to send you back, I'll take over your contract. I've got some savings I can use. And we can get married, even if it can't be official. I bet Matt knows somebody who could do it. I won't let them send you somewhere else, I promise."

For a long time, there was only the sound of the rain, and then she spoke in a whisper roughened by tears. "Don't make promises you can't keep."

She fell asleep a few minutes later. I got up and turned the lights off so they wouldn't wake us when the power came back on, and then I laid back down. As I listened to Jenna's deep, gentle breathing beside me, I wondered where Brian was sleeping. I wouldn't let myself think anything worse.



When we got to the cabin, Mom was sitting on the deck with a half-empty cup of coffee. "Your father's still out looking with them."

I couldn't think of anything to say. Then I turned to Jenna. "Can you..."

She heard the hopeful note in my voice and shook her head. "My sense of smell is barely better than yours. I can't track him."

"Well, we can look, anyway." I turned to walk down the steps but ran into Dad on his way up.

"Nothing yet," he said to Mom. Then, to me, "A word with you, inside."

We went into the kitchen. He took something from a cabinet and set it down on the table in front of me. Jenna's collar.

"Did you know it's illegal to disable a SAC's collar?"

I didn't flinch. "You'd turn in your own son?"

"I didn't say that. But remember that if you hadn't taken this off, she wouldn't have been able to leave. If you hadn't taken her wherever you went on your little joyride..."

"I didn't take her anywhere. She came with me."

"It's time for you to learn," he said quietly, "that what you do can affect other people. Can hurt other people. It's time for you to grow up and start thinking about that." He paused. "Until we find Brian, Jenna's confined to this house. After that, I'm calling the agency and canceling the contract."

"You could at least let her look for him." I felt my hands tighten into fists. "Brian could have gotten lost with or without her. She's never done anything wrong. Turn me in, fine. Blame me for everything. But you can't tell her it's over just because of this."

"I'm not going to tell her that," he replied. "You are." And he pushed open the door and went back out to the deck.

I stood looking at the collar for a minute—glaring at it, actually—then snatched it up, strode to the edge of the lake, and flung the thing as far as I could. It splashed into the water and sank.

"Thank you," Jenna said softly, behind me.

There was no point in putting it off. "Dad said they're going to—"

"I know." A lighter tone crept into her voice. "My sense of smell may not be much better than yours, but my hearing definitely is." She paused. "So what are we going to do?"

I held her, kissed her slowly, then pulled back to meet her eyes. "I'm going to keep the promise I made last night. If... If that's what you want."

Her eyes shone with tears, but she managed a smile. "Yes. It's what I want."

There was a shout from the deck, and I looked to see Dad carrying Brian up the stairs. Jenna and I ran back to the house.

"He was asleep," Dad said, his voice breaking.

Mom took Brian and didn't let him go. She couldn't say anything for several minutes. "Honey, everyone was looking for you," she said finally, brushing Brian's hair back from his forehead. "Didn't you hear them?"

Brian shook his head. I smiled in spite of everything and looked at Jenna. "Told you he could sleep through anything."



As it turned out, he had been following us, but he'd gotten turned around in the dark and ended up in the woods by the lake. He was hungry and dehydrated, but otherwise he was fine.

Mom put him to bed early. She looked exhausted herself when she came into the kitchen for another cup of coffee. I was on the phone, dialing Matt's number. Busy. I hung up.

"I tried to talk him out of it," she said, "but he's determined to cancel the contract."

"It won't matter." I tried again. Busy. "Come on, Matt, get off the phone..."

"Friend from school?"

"A guy we met yesterday. I'm trying to..." I trailed off, then shrugged. No point in keeping secrets now. "I'm trying to find out if he knows anybody who'll marry a human and a SAC."

She stirred half-and-half into her coffee, then sipped. "I didn't know it had gotten that serious yet."

That serious? Yet? "Were we that obvious?"

"Just about." She smiled. "Well, I was hoping to at least be able to send out engraved invitations, but considering how your father feels about all of it, this is probably the best way." She took another sip, and her smile broadened. "We eloped, too."

I filed that away for pondering at a later date and dialed Matt's number again. This time it rang. "Hey, Matt? Yeah. Wonder if you could do me a favor..."



We exchanged vows by the lake at sunset, on the opposite shore from the cabin. We spent our wedding night by the lake, too—on a blanket near the water, alternately making love and being eaten alive by mosquitoes. I couldn't get enough of her, and the feeling was more than mutual. She was usually ready to go again long before I was. It was wonderful. For one night, we were able to forget everything that had happened, and just enjoy each other.

We moved in with Matt the next day, and he and Rick helped us find jobs that could at least pay for our share of the rent. The biggest favor they did, though, came a few weeks later: Rick pulled some strings with a friend in the agency, and I was able to purchase Jenna's contract from them. Permanently. It used up most of my college savings, and the ring I got for Jenna took care of the rest. I have to say, it left a bad taste in my mouth to be buying her, but Matt pointed out that I was only buying her freedom. It was her choice to become my wife.

Ordinarily, this would have been a great place to roll the credits. We were married, Dad was dealing with it, slowly, Brian was great with it even though he missed us both, and Matt was busily trying to find us a cheap apartment of our own—probably because he hadn't gotten much sleep thanks to us newlyweds. Things were going well.

Until Jenna got sick, and we couldn't figure out why. I wasn't sure whether to call a doctor or a vet, honestly, but the agency referred us to a specialist in SAC medicine. And what she told us... Scientifically, it was next to impossible, but

the tests didn't lie. Nobody could tell us how, but Jenna's ravenous desire on our wedding night hadn't been just affection. It was the beginning of an estrus cycle.

Mom and Dad gave us the cabin, at least for the near future. It's funny how accepting parents can be when there's a potential grandchild on the way. They're paying for me to go back to school, and fortunately I'm able to take most of my classes online so I can be home with Jenna. The agency's covering her medical care.

The doctors say there's a good chance she'll miscarry, but even they're hoping they're wrong. All we can do is wait. To keep me sane, Matt suggested I write down everything that's happened, in case we end up being interviewed for the media, or medical journals, or whatever. (He thinks it's a heartwarming, inspirational story. He's also trying

to decide who should play him in the movie.)

Summer is finally over. As I write here on the deck, the last of the leaves are falling, and Jenna is asleep in the lounge chair beside me. A few of the russet and crimson leaves have swirled her way and are caught in the white sweater that covers the gentle rise of her belly.

So many things have changed, but one thing hasn't: we still don't know what to expect for the rest of our lives. But in a moment, I'll put my journal aside and go to her, kissing her lightly to wake her up before it gets too cold. I'll place my hand where I can feel the first stirring movements within, and I'll know that, for right now at least, everything is exactly the way it's supposed to be.



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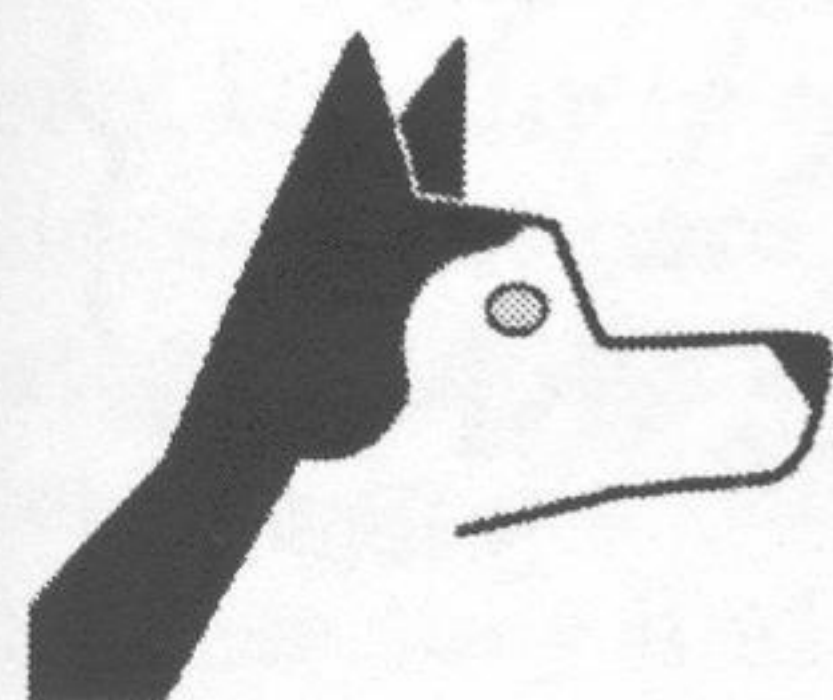
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SNOCAT

Le Roux's Love Center

by Phil Geusz

illustrated by Jennie Hoffer

Phil Geusz is a Tennessee auto worker, and has been writing furry fiction for about four years now. His hobbies include fishing, shooting, old cars, and spoiling a mongrel dog named Bear. His novels can be found for sale at <http://ebooks.xepher.net>

Jennie, aka "Snocat", is almost finished with her stint as a college student. She looks forward to reuniting with her family back in the city of Los Angeles, where her beloved black cat is waiting patiently for her return. She hopes to have a career in the currently disheveled industry of animation.

Going to the drive-in with your family is usually pretty uncool when you're a teenager. But for a werebunny, it can be kind of special.

After all, it beats sitting in a cage the whole night of the Full Moon, or being hidden away in a back closet like happens to some 'weres whose parents can't deal with it. And it is kinda nice to know that my folks care enough about me to drive two hundred miles every twenty-nine and a half days so that I can undergo my Change in what they consider to be positive surroundings.

I'll never forget the first time we went to "Le Roux's Child Lycanthropy Prey-Species Love Center" when I was only thirteen and still just a kid myself. It was converted from an old drive-in theater, which seemed kind of weird at first. But the arrangements made perfect sense, once you saw them. Drive-ins have always been good places for families to get together, and with a few minor changes the setting was ideal for Change night. We werekids could socialize and be together, yet be kept safe from all the various sorts of predators. And safe is cool for us prey-types. Even as teens, we tend to be rather cautious.

The place looked kinda spooky from the highway. There was a great big huge movie screen and double fourteen-foot high cyclone fences all the way around. Since then they've had a kanga-kid who goes non-sentient when he Changes escape, so now they've gone to a double sixteen-foot barrier. Usually in a drive-in the cars all line up for tickets, but here you had to park and get evaluated in a little hospital-thingie before they would let you in. I'd been evaluated lots of times, but I guess they had to see for themselves. Probably it's an insurance thing. My parents had called ahead, so we didn't have to wait a real long time

like some families did. But still, it seemed to take forever.

A lot of kids with lycanthropy are hidden away by their parents, but I'm lucky. I got mine from Aunt Judy while she was baby-sitting me when I was still real little. It happened before she even realized that she was infected herself, of course, and since then she hasn't spread it to anyone else. But my family is perhaps more understanding than most because of this. They know it was no one's fault. The bulk of the parents who were waiting with their kids looked ashamed, though. Like they had done something wrong. And the kids themselves seemed sad and nervous.

The nervous part was easy to understand, of course. It *was* the day of the full moon, after all, and I was pretty nervous myself. You see, Le Roux's Love Center specializes in working with herbivorous werekids and their families. Prey types, in other words. Deer. Impala. Rats. Mice. And rabbits like me. Werewolves and such *love* the full moon. But for us, it is usually a time of danger and fear. A careless kid can get eaten, you see. Or even just an unlucky one. Perhaps by a classmate and friend, caught up in the mindless bloodlust.

Finally, we were shown to an examination room in the back. A doctor came to check me out. He was wearing a yellow button that read "Love Center Volunteer" in red ink. Dr. Yen was his name. Mom had filled out a little folder about me, and the doctor studied it with great care. Then he asked me a few questions.

"Scott," he asked, "are you a vegetarian all the time?"

"Well," I replied, "I like to drink milk. And sometimes at school I eat a piece of ham. Just to prove to the other kids I can."

"Mm hmm. And does it make you ill?"

"Well... Yeah. Sorta."

"I see." He scribbled something on his chart,

then continued. "Don't be surprised if you lose the taste for milk as you get older. You know, werebunnies are very rare. I've only met one other."

"Really? I've never met any. Even my aunt who gave this to me is a were-fox. She had never Changed yet herself, so it was one of those cross-species things."

"Hmm. Well, it just so happens that the other were-bunny I know owns this place. He set up the whole affair. Heck of a nice guy." He closed the little folder and scrawled his signature across the front. "I think it best if we put you in with the shy species, Scott. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes," I said reluctantly. "I do stay sentient, but can get awful..."

"Afraid?" he asked, looking me in the eyes.

"Yeah," I agreed, glancing downwards.

He reached out and firmly grasped my shoulder until I tilted my head back to meet his eye. Very earnestly, he spoke. "Don't *ever* be ashamed of being afraid, Scott! Not *ever*! Do you hear me?"

I tried to pull away, startled. But he maintained his grip.

"Have you ever been in a fight, son?" he asked. "A real fistfight?"

"Well, no."

"Of course not," he replied. "How about a really violent argument?"

"No." I didn't understand where this was going.

Dr. Yen turned to my parents. "If you had to describe Scott in a single word, what word would you choose?"

My parents looked baffled for a second, then turned towards each other. "Nice?" my Mom tentatively asked Dad. "Good?"

He nodded firmly and turned back to Dr. Yen. "Good. That's the best single word. Though I might add pleasant, clean, conscientious..."

I blushed a bit, but no one noticed.

"Precisely my point," Dr. Yen continued. "Werebunnies are ALWAYS good people. You won't find that written in the textbooks anywhere, but we practitioners know it to be true. Weredeer and many other weregrazers are pretty nice folks too. Scott, you might be afraid sometimes, sure enough. And you sometimes have every reason to be afraid. It's a dangerous world for good people.

For people with pure hearts, who do not hurt others. But what you get in return is beyond price. Never, ever be ashamed of being a werebunny, or of being afraid."

And he scratched me behind the ear, of all things! How did he know I like that even in human form?

The receptionist gave us a green ticket on the way out. We piled back into the station wagon, and lined up at the entrance. When it was our turn to squeeze through the gate, Dad displayed our ticket, and a neatly uniformed attendant gave us directions to a small separately fenced-off area. She had soft dark eyes, I noted, and as she pulled back from the car I caught a burst of some sort of cervid scent from her. Moonrise must not have been too far off, if she was emitting pheromones already and I could pick them up.

The shy-species area was easy to find, as it was separately gated and marked with green placards. We still had a little time before dusk, and Mom spent it setting up our dinner while I explored a bit. All the gates were still open, and it was kind of fun trying to figure out who was what. The grey-ticket area had a low fence, a big sandbox, and fine steel mesh underfoot; obviously it was designed for weremoles and other prodigious burrowers. None were present that night, and the area stood empty. I had never met a weremole and was disappointed, though I have had the pleasure of getting to know some since. They usually wear glasses, even in human form. There was a corral where were-equines could run and play together, and a great area of turf fenced off for the different sorts of werecattle. The first area was marked with red, and the second with orange.

My own green-ticket area was much smaller. There were little doghouse-shaped thingies that looked really friendly to me right off. I knew that they had been provided as cover for we shy ground-dwelling types. There was also a network of poles and swings and such for the enjoyment of squirrely folks, and patches of brush that must have seemed very attractive to deer-kids; there were several young ones already bedded down there when we arrived. They looked very calm and happy.

Almost before I knew it evening was upon us, and we green-taggers were getting well acquainted. Dad had found another father who

"I think it best if we put you in with the shy species, Scott. Wouldn't you agree?"

was a software engineer, and they talked shop while Mom and a group of other mothers reassured a single lady whose son, Robbie, had just become a werechipmunk. He was only eight, and had Changed but once before. I was playing cards with him and trying to calm him down some.

"I was so scared last time!" he exclaimed tearfully. "I didn't know who I was or what was happening or *anything*!"

"It can be scary," I agreed. "But this looks to me like a pretty safe place. When you're safe and secure, it's a whole lot easier. In fact, it can even be fun!"

"Fun?" Robbie asked. "Being little-bitty and maybe getting stepped on or eaten can be *fun*?"

Frankly, I was sometimes pretty frightened myself. But I wasn't going to let this little kid know it. "Of course it's fun! You can explore all kinds of things, different foods taste good, you can smell neat stuff—"

"But you can't see!" wailed Robbie.

I sighed. "No, you can't see very well. But you'll find you don't need to. That is, if chipmunks are at all like rabbits. Which I suspect they are."

"Stay with me, Scottie!" Robbie begged.

"Please, stay with me! Don't make me be alone, like last time!"

"Of course I'll stay with you!" I told him, hugging the poor little kid tightly. "Of course I'll stay. We can explore together. OK?"

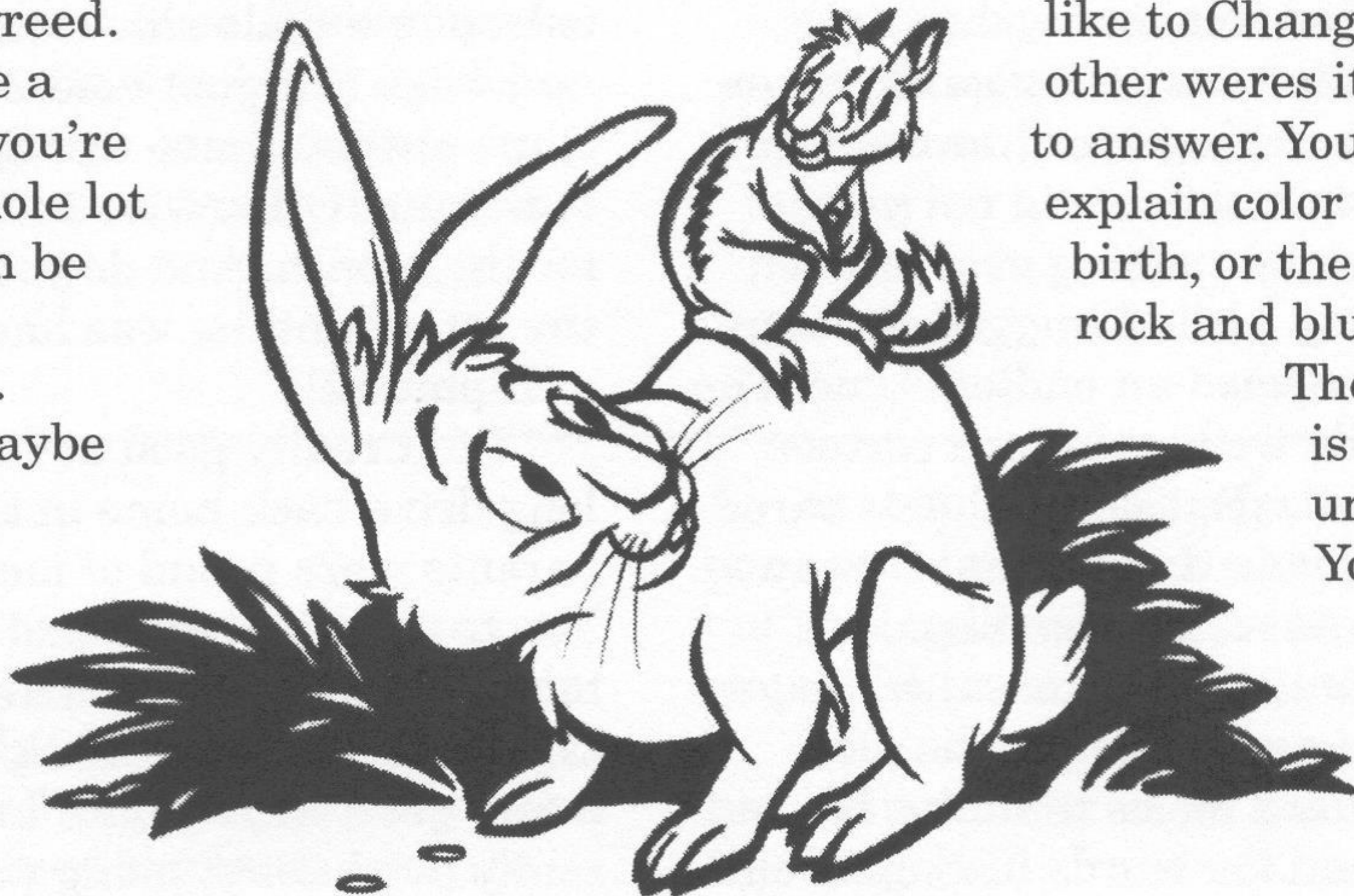
"OK," the little kid replied. He seemed a bit happier to me.

As darkness approached the world grew more and more electric for us werekids. It was impossible to sit still, and the understanding parents in the green-ticket area didn't even blink when we all stripped naked just before dark. Since the Full Moon was already up—we could feel it straining at our very substance—the Change came upon us as the last bit of sun vanished beneath the horizon, at precisely 8:22 PM.

Usually kids like Robbie greet the Change with screams of primal terror, and admittedly there were a few of those to be heard across the theater complex. But mostly we were well prepared for what was to come and took it fairly easily. That was what the Love Center was for, after all.

Robbie was one of those who screamed, at first.

He wrapped around me like a boa constrictor, howling madly into my sensitive ears. But I held tightly onto him in turn, as we writhed and rolled across the turf. Robbie's Mom tried to separate us once, I think, but someone pulled her away. Which was just as well; one or the other of us would certainly have bit her had she not left us alone just then.



People always ask me what it's like to Change, but like all the other weres it's very hard for me to answer. You might as well try to explain color to a man blind from birth, or the difference between rock and blues music to the deaf.

The best way I can put it is that everything in the universe becomes fluid.

You don't seem to shift so much as the rest of the world seems to shift around you. I think it's because you see the world in a fundamentally different way when you are an animal;

your brain actually rewires itself to fit the new senses. I know that as a bunny I could get by fine without eyesight but the very thought of losing my sense of smell is terrifying. You just have a different way of looking at the world while Changed. Priorities change, even reality itself changes in a way I just cannot describe.

There aren't any words to explain it. You simply have to live it to understand.

But right then, I wasn't worried about explaining. I was worried about Robbie! He howled like a banshee until finally his throat reshaped itself. Then he whined in piercing tones that I knew his mother's ears were not designed to hear. I was still able to talk; the bigger you are the more slowly you Change, of course. "Smell me, Robbie!" I cried in tones that already sounded more like rabbit wails than my normal voice. "Smell me! It's important! You have to know my scent!" And finally he buried his nose into the soft deep fur that already covered my shoulder and breathed deep.

We Changed silently then, Robbie and I, silently because it is generally the nature of prey species to be quiet and discreet. And as we changed, we hugged each other until when we were through we looked like a single little ball of fur.

I turn into a very young rabbit, naturally, not being yet fully grown. And Robbie was an even more immature chipmunk pup. I pulled away from

my friend, sat up, blinked and sniffed around. A bunch of humans were arranged around us; I could distinguish Mom and Dad, by smell so I hopped over to reassure them that all was well. They stroked me a bit, which made me feel warm and safe. I could no longer understand human speech, of course, but the expression of love crosses species lines. Then I heard an anguished chittering and saw a human, presumably Robbie's Mom, chasing her poor terrified son across the turf.

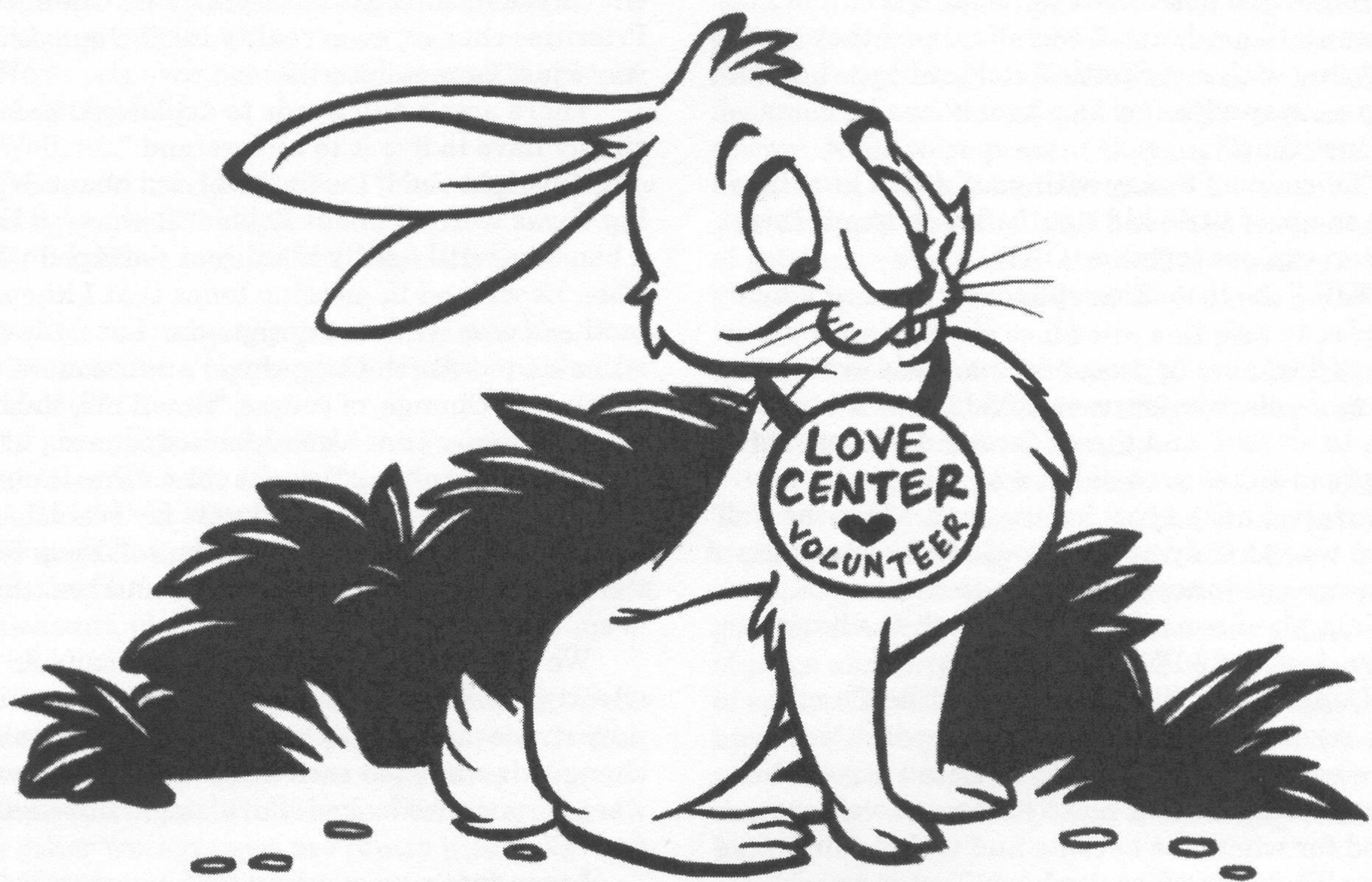
Even juvenile bunnies are pretty quick. I was on Robbie in a flash, crouching over him and protecting him from the mother that did not yet understand. My folks came rushing over and led the sobbing human away while I hugged my chipmunk friend for what seemed an endless time. The first movie started while we lay there, a cartoon featuring talking animals. But neither of us cared. It was more for the humans than for us anyway. There is no such thing as scent recording, and therefore films seem shallow and unreal while you are in animal form. Even with scents, the plot would have been very hard for us to follow. We could neither understand the words nor make out the images with our weak eyes.

Instead, I eventually got Robbie to play with me. We scuttled through the little "safe" places, and to our utter delight discovered tunnels inside

connecting them into a secret warren that we had not even suspected existed while we were human. Other tunnels came up under the brush-piles, and we visited the fawns who insisted on remaining immobile there all night long. Talk about your strong instincts! I chewed delicate clover and sampled some new weeds, while Robbie, finally gaining a little confidence, chomped rather noisily (to my ears) on various seeds. Eventually, he fell asleep in a little side tunnel. An attendant came and woke him just before dawn so that he could climb out and have enough room to Change back to human. Otherwise he would have been stuck for the month. And do you know what! He fought the attendant, he was having so much fun being a chipmunk!

I felt really good about myself as we began the long drive back home in the early dawn light. My parents were proud of me, too. They called up Dr. Yen to tell him how I had helped, and now every month he assigns me a new werekid who has some kind of troubles to Change with. My family gets in free, I get a neat yellow button to wear, and I feel really good about being who and what I am.

Who says being a werebunny isn't as cool as being a werewolf or a werepanther?



The Three Little Wolves

by Elan Ruskin

illustrated by Amy Fennell

Twice a finalist for the Isaac Asimov Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Science Fiction Writing, Elan Ruskin has also worked as a reporter for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. He is presently involved in critical video game research as a graduate student at the Carnegie Mellon University Entertainment Technology Center.

Amy "Lyosha" Fennell is currently minoring in Fine Arts at the University of Guelph in Ontario. When not studying and drawing she enjoys caffeine, sugar, piranha fish, and seatbelts. This is her second appearance in Anthrolations. You can find much more of her work online at <http://lyerf.com/lyosha>.

Dinner had been eaten, and the remains cleared, and the children, at long last, sat in their beds, waiting for the tradition of the bedtime tale. Ashketh and Rill were still growling at each other over who had really deserved the larger portion of the meal; Cyril, long since bored of the argument, covered her eyes with her paws, tucked her tail between her legs, and sweetly begged them to please stop fighting, for once, for only a few short minutes, so that I could at least get on with the story.

Her brothers laughed: what did she know, being only a girl, the youngest, and short of fang?

And so it was that I knew which story to tell the pups that night.

It came to pass in those days before cities, my children, that there lived in the woods a wolf, alone but for her scars and the three wretched pups that the pack had left when their sire had died. There was no place in the pack, you see, for an old widow with three mouths to feed.

Nor, old and gray as she was, could the wolf barely creep outside of the cave that was their den, let alone find food enough to feed three starving whelps.

So in those days when a wolf that was once a queen sat shivering in the cold with her last three children, she told them of a certain pig that lived in the forest as well. "Follow the stream that chatters to itself in the moonlight past the place where reeds sing with fear at the wind and the trees themselves have crumbled from pride. There in a clearing you may spy, if you are fortunate, a little garden, and in that a cottage," she told them, "be not fooled, for in that cottage lives no manflesh but a porker, fat and tender from the spoils of his garden."

At this the three pups licked their lips, for none could remember when they had eaten aught but squirrels and other vermin that strayed too close to the mouth of their cave.

"He is a wily pig, though," said the wolf, "and has bested many wiser hunters than you to live this long. Still..." and at this she fell silent, letting her great and nearly toothless jaws come to rest upon the ground. But her pups knew what was to come next.

For the mother was old and the pups young, and their legs meek with hunger while the deer were fleet. If they were to eat anything at all, before they grew too weak to even close their teeth upon meat, it would have to be this pig, fat and tender and unable to run for the flesh that hung vast upon his frame.

Now I call them pups, but they were little wolves, old enough to hunt and catch a little on their own, and they were old enough to fight among themselves.

"Shall we set out as a pack, then?" asked the youngest wolf. "Track the pig in his den, bring him home for dinner?"

"A pack?" asked the eldest brother. "Do you really think it will take all of us to bring back one little pig? Why, I think I could bring back that fat-addled porker all by myself."

"An excellent idea," said the middle brother. "Why don't you go get the pig and bring him back here for us?"

The eldest brother growled at this. "I think I will, if only to prove to you just how much stronger and braver I am."

The second brother said nothing; if someone was offering to bring him food for free, he was not one to argue.

"As for you," said the eldest brother to his sister, "If I fail, and I won't, then our brother here will go after me, and not you. Do you understand?"



And he took her muzzle between his teeth and bit it, hard, just to show her that he meant it.

So from this you see, my whelps, that the three pups had distinguishing characteristics among them, much as you do. In their case it was that the first was stupid, the second lazy, and the third not like her brothers.

But the second was strong, and the first stronger, and the third only their sister, so it came to pass that on the next night when the moon's waxing crescent hung within the waters of the stream that chattered to itself, it was the first little wolf that followed its length past the reeds that moaned in the wind and the trees that lay broken and crumbled upon the dusty path to a clearing.

And in that clearing he found a garden, and in that garden he found a cottage.

It was not much of a cottage to the first pup's eyes: a few walls of straw, a roof of thatch—more a hut than a cottage, and barely enough to hold its shape against a strong rain. But the garden around it was large, if not vast, and well-kept besides, and so too must have been the pig inside.

So the first little wolf walked up to the door in the front of the cottage, and said, "Hallo there."

"Hallo there," said the pig from inside. "Who are you?"

"I am a wolf," said the first little wolf, "and I have come to eat you."

"And how will you do that?" asked the pig.

"I will tear through the shambles you call a home," said the first little wolf, "and take you from it." And with that he threw himself with all his might at the walls of the hut, but what he did not know is that such huts are held together with tar, and pitch, and sundry things not fit to speak of to you, my children, and so in short order the wolf found himself thoroughly tangled in the wall.

It was with great effort and much loss of fur that he tore himself free thereafter, and with still more effort and more fur lost that he came free after throwing himself at the wall a second time, and by the third time he had freed himself the wolf looked more like a lamb shorn and covered all over with pitch than a proper hunter of the night, my children. And so it was with a heavy heart and an empty stomach that the first little wolf returned home that night, washing himself in

the stream that chattered in the light of the moon and weeping bitterly all the way.

The pig, however, was some frightened by this, and set to build himself a better cottage against all that might come.

So it came to pass on the next night when the moon's half-full disc hung within the waters of the stream that murmured to itself, it

was the second little wolf that followed its length past the reeds that cried in the wind and the trees that lay broken and crumbled upon the mossy path to a clearing.

And in that clearing he found a garden, and in that garden he found a cottage.

It was something of a cottage to the second pup's eyes: a few walls of sturdy wood, a roof of lumber—more a

cabin than a cottage, and more than enough to keep all inside dry against the weather. But the garden around it was large, if not vast, and well-kept besides, and so too must have been the pig inside.

So the second little wolf, who was lazy but hardly stupid, walked up to the door in the front of the cottage and said, "Hallo there."

"Hallo there," said the pig from inside. "Who are you?"

"I am your brother from Pigslands south," said the second little wolf, "come to visit you for the night."

Now the pig was some taken aback by this, for he did have a brother in Pigslands south, but he knew also that such brother was shiftless and hungry besides, and would quickly eat him out of house and home. So the pig, who through no fault of his own could not tell a wolf from his brother, said, "Very well, my brother, but first you must work the garden so that there will be enough for both of us to eat."

The pig knew, you see, that if his brother tilled the garden then there would be food enough for both of them.

So the second little wolf took to the garden, and he raked, and he hoed, and he weeded, and he tilled, until he thought his paws would drop from the ends of his legs. And then he returned to



the door of the cottage, and said, "Surely with all this work I have done there will be enough food to feed an army of pigs. Pray let me in that we may share it."

But the pig knew also that his brother from Pigslands south was shiftless and untidy besides, and would quickly make a mess of his cottage if allowed to. So the pig, who always thought three and a half steps in advance on this sort of matter, said, "Very well, my brother, but first you must pitch the walls of my home to keep the rain from coming in."

The pig knew, you see, that if his brother pitched the walls then he would take the same care indoors.

So the second little wolf found the pitch from where it had been left from the first cottage, and set to painting it along every crack, nook, cranny, and crevice of that cottage's wooden walls until he thought he might never see his paws again, black and tarred over as they were. Then he returned to the door of the cottage, and said, "Surely with all this work I have done the cottage will be dry and clean no matter what storms might knock at your roof. Pray let me in that we may enjoy it."

But the pig knew by this time that his brother from Pigslands south was shiftless and foolish besides, and might someday let in wolves during his stay. So the pig said, "Very well, my brother, but first you must build a wall to keep out the wolves."

The pig knew, you see, the value of a strong door.

"I am the wolf!" cried the second little wolf, who grew both hungrier and lazier with every task set to him. Then, with much snarling and gnashing of teeth, he hurled himself at the cottage's little door, but the pig locked it tight and threw all the bolts before cowering in fear. And so it was with an angry heart and an empty stomach that the second little wolf returned home that night, stopping to cool his worn paws in the stream that murmured in the light of the moon and grumbling all the way.

The pig, however, was some frightened by this, and set to build himself a better cottage against all that might come.

So it came to pass on the next night when the moon's waxing gibbous hung within the waters of

the stream that giggled to itself, it was the third little wolf that followed its length past the reeds that howled in the wind and the trees that lay broken and crumbled upon the grassy path to a clearing.

And in that clearing she found a garden, and in that garden she found a cottage.

It was more than a cottage to the third pup's eyes: a few walls and a floor of solid rock, a roof of shingle—more a manor than a cottage, and more than enough to keep all inside dry and warm against the weather. But the garden around it was large, if not vast, and very well-kept besides, and so too must have been the pig inside.

So the third little wolf, who was neither lazy nor stupid, walked up to the door in the front of the cottage, and said, "Hallo there."

"Hallo there," said the pig from inside. "Who are you?"

"I am the west wind," said the third little wolf, "come to blow your house down."

"Ridiculous," said the pig, who could at least tell a wolf from the wind, "now go away and leave me alone."

"No, truly; shortly I will huff, and I will puff, and I will blow your house down, so you had better start running," said the wolf.

But the pig laughed at this and went to enjoy the carrots from his larder.

Now the third wolf, as I have said, was neither lazy nor stupid, and yet she knew she could blow the house down. First she walked about the cottage, gathering the wood that had been left from the second home and the straw that had been left from the first. These she set in neat piles at the base of the western stone wall.

"Ho there," said the pig, "what's all that scratching and clattering I hear out there?"

"I am the west wind, and I am practicing my huffing, so you had better start running," said the wolf.

But the pig laughed at this and went to nibble the lettuce from his larder.

So the third wolf, who while weak could still scratch and dig as well as you can, my children, began to scabble underneath the stones of the western wall. And with much scratching and even more scraping she managed to dig a little hole under the wall, into which she placed the wood from the second cottage. Then she dug a little bit more, and then she shored a little bit more with the wood, until finally a trench had been dug

**"Ridiculous,"
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under the entire western wall. The wall was held up only by a framing of wood, and under the wood the third little wolf placed the straw.

“Ho there,” said the pig, for he had no windows in his western wall, “what’s all that scuffling and shoveling I hear out there?”

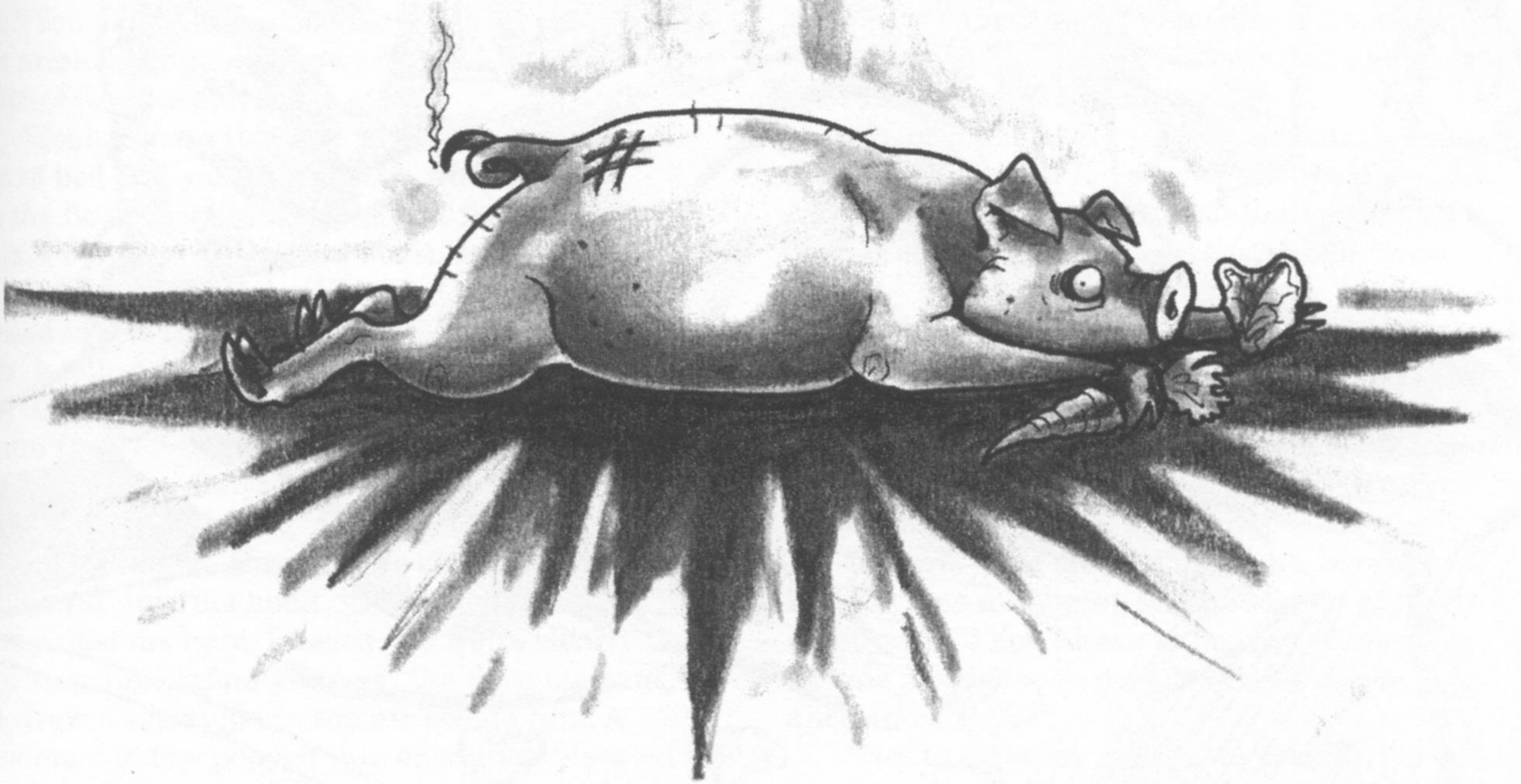
“I am the west wind, and I am practicing my puffing, so you had better start running NOW!” said the wolf.

But the pig laughed at this and went to recline in a chair he had built for himself.

So the third little wolf started a fire in the straw, where it spread until it consumed the straw, and then until it consumed the wood, until finally the framing collapsed, and the wall, very much surprised to find that there was nothing to hold it

up any more, collapsed as well. And there, between three stone walls and a wolf coming through what was left of the fourth, sat a pig, holding a bit of carrot in one hand, a bit of lettuce in the other, and quite a lot of meat in between.

And so it was with a high heart and a full stomach that the third little wolf returned home that night, carrying the carcass of a pig, stopping only to slake her thirst in the stream that giggled in the light of the moon, and eating the best parts for herself all the way.





Two Sick Days

by Andrija Popovic

illustrated by Jonathan Roth

Andrija Popovic is a former film student now living in Woodbridge, VA and working in association management. His stories have been printed in *Yarf!*, the *Anthrocon Program Book*, and *Anthrolations* while the webzine *Wild Violet* has carried his haiku experiments. His thoughts on working rough jobs: "Spring flowers blossom / Hot hail pours from the gray sky— / The petals survive."

Jonathan Roth was seduced by the fuzzy side of the art world in 1994, and gave up a respectable career in biochemistry for the chance to draw cartoons for a living. His art, comics, and animation can be seen online at www.kitsunestudios.com.

Monday, 8:35am

"I'm going to die."

"You're not going to die," said God, shaking his head. "It's just a head cold."

"It can't be," I said. "I'm having hallucinations."

"You are?" God raised his eyebrow and crossed his arms. Human eyebrows were so comical—little tufts of fur glued over his eyes.

"Yeah. I'm seeing God right now." I leaned out of bed and yanked a tissue from the box on the floor. Closing my eyes and flattening my ears, I blew my nose. "God doesn't visit every sick Husky'Struct out there." I balled up the tissue and tossed it into the waste basket. It bounced off the rim, landing on the floor. "Goddammit."

"Ok," said God. He turned to the tissue. "I damn thee!"

The tissue didn't seem to care.

"That should do it," He said. God ran his unpadded fingers through the short mane of brown fur atop his head. "Look, you're the one who called me here. I heard you quite clearly this morning, just before you took the decongestant." He drew a rectangle in the air beside him. A glowing window popped into existence, bisected by a red line, covered with recording and playback keys.

God had a holographic version of NaviSound. Oh joy of joys.

"Oh, no, not again," I heard myself say. At least, I assumed it was me. The voice on the recording sounded like he'd inhaled cement. "God help me... can't be sick... miss work... not like this..."

The recording stopped. "See?" He said. "You called and here I am. Now, be a good boy and listen to your creator. You've got a pretty nasty head

cold, but it is survivable. You need rest, fluids, and a decongestant every twelve hours. Make sure you blow your nose regularly. Don't suck it all down; it'll make things worse. And don't be afraid to use a decongestant spray if you have to."

"Joy." I flattened my ears. Decongestant spray. Great. "Looks like another work day lost." I scratched myself behind the ear. "Well, at least Michael went shopping yesterday... Oh, bugger."

"What?" asked God. "He forget something?"

"Yeah, the Echinacea tea."

"No problem," said God. "I've contacted a delivery service. They'll have some tea over here, and extra orange sports drink." He smiled. "I also sent an e-mail to your boss, letting her know you'd be out for today and tomorrow. But you should be well enough to come back on Wednesday. If—emphasis on if—you take care of yourself."

"Thanks," I said, taking a long pull of orange juice from my sports bottle. It burned my throat and the stinging set my back fur on edge. "You didn't have to do that, you know."

"I know." God crossed his arms, his funky Human face managing to look soulful and silly all at once. "I don't have to be here, either. But I made a promise to myself when I created your ancestors."

"Not to interfere unless we asked?" I growled, reaching for another tissue. God smirked.

"That, too. But I said I'd be a better creator to you than the Humans' god." He sat down at the edge of the bed. "Or gods, as it were. They tended to just sit around when people really could have used a hand. Never wanted to be one of those distant, unknowable types. I'd rather be a 'help you help yourself, see you at the pub afterwards' type god."

I laughed. Closing my eyes, I leaned back against my pillows, breathing freely for the moment. "So, how do you think you're doing?"

"I don't know. You tell me. How am I doing, as Gods go?"

I think, just before I fell asleep, I said, "Terribly."

Monday, 10:46am

Drowning. I woke up drowning. Water, thick and heavy, pushed into my nose. It slurped through my sinuses, down the length of my muzzle and into my lungs. When I opened my mouth, my breath rattled, gasps blocked as I clawed for air. I screamed.

And I opened my eyes. No water, just a thick wall of mucosa filling my nasal passages. God, I hate head colds. The drowning dreams were bad enough when my nose is clear. I took another hit of my saline spray—just saline spray—and sat up in bed.

God was gone. If he ever was there.

For the record, my name is Joshua Mital. Middle name my little mystery. Most call me Josh. I'm an Organic Construct based on the genetic profile of a Terran Husky. That's Husky'Struct for short. My ancestors were created over two centuries ago by God.

God, by the way, has a name. It's Paul. And he's not a god in the mythic sense. He's a Synthesized Intelligence birthed sometime in the early 21st century and charged with guarding the sum total knowledge of the now extinct Human race. And watching us.

But, with nearly a billion years of Human technology at his disposal and the ability to create new life, who's to say he isn't a God in the traditional sense?

I'm twenty-seven years old. I manage a membership database. I live in a three-level town house just outside of the Newport-Richmond metroplex with my roommate, the aforementioned Michael, and a small collection of personal effects.

This is Hell. I am its chief damned.

I stared at my room. Not wanting to move too many muscles, I swept my eyes around—from the cluttered night table to my Navi, then over the cluttered bookshelves by the window, past the bathroom door, to the HTV set, my closet, and finally the door out. Home. For today and tomorrow at least.

Growling, I kicked the covers away and stood

up. The world blurred. My eyes watered and my head throbbed as I stumbled to my feet. I lunged for the saline solution and pumped two shots into my nostrils before taking a big, thick inhale.

Air actually managed to make its way through the muck. "Navi," I mumbled to my computer. The holoscreens flickered on. "Find Laughing Wolf's greatest hits. Start on 'Resurrection Blues,' then skip to random play."

"As you wish, Joshua," purred my Navi. I sighed. The Navi was set to the manufacturer's default female voice but, it always sounded just like my ex.

"Thank you," I said before blowing out another sticky wad of mucus into a poor, unsuspecting muzzle tissue. Laughing Wolf's signature guitar sound—bare claws plucking metal strings in a sharp, staccato rhythm—poured from the speakers. I wobbled to the bathroom.

"Ok," I said to myself.

"Here we go. Muscles on line. Systems nominal. Walk..." I took a step. "Walk..." I took another step. Eventually I made it to the bathroom. The rest of the house was still unconquered.

Monday, 11:34am

"Hi, Joshua? I'm from GOD."

I blinked, cursing Him. The delivery person was a Collie'Struct. Worse yet, she was an absolute hottie with bright eyes, a fluffy tail, gorgeous pelt and impeccable teeth. God had sent me a pinup model dressed in a red delivery jacket, jeans, boots and a t-shirt that said 'GHT C' while I looked and felt like vacuum cleaner lint.

Thanks a lot, God, I thought. If you weren't all powerful, I'd whup your ass.

"Pardon?" I said, buying time.

"Guaranteed On-time Delivery," she said. "I'm here with your groceries."

I put the ass whupping on hold. Even I couldn't hold Him responsible for that acronym. "Oh, ok." She grabbed a DNA sample, asked me to sign her com-pad and handed me my groceries.

"Thanks... um?"

"Eveline," she said.

"Eveline." I smiled, praying there wasn't a big clump of snot caught in my nose. "Thanks. Oh, what's the shirt say?"

She opened up her jacket and showed me. I remembered the soap bar and the way it stretched across her more than anything else. "It's an old

**Thanks a lot
God, I thought.
If you weren't
all powerful,
I'd whup your
ass.**

Human film. Late 20th, early 21st century. The original DVD was just converted to HVD. Wicked-cool angry 'I wanna crash civilization because my job sucks' stuff. It's on-line. You should check it out. It's cathartic."

"I will, thanks."

Eveline closed her jacket and started towards her van. "Hope you feel better."

"I already do. Thank you!" I stupidly wagged my tail as she drove off. Back inside, I smacked the heel of my palm against my aching head.

"I already do. Idiot. Next time, try to sound even more pathetic." Grumbling, I emptied out the groceries and started the tea brewing.

Monday, 12:04pm

The list was done. Written out, by hand, in one of my old, ratty, spiral-bound sketchbooks was a list of things I had to get done before the day ended. Laundry, vacuuming, bills, phone calls to the utilities, et-cetera, et-cetera.

Rest and recuperation were for the dead. I learned that when I got my first real job. By real, I mean a job where you do everything you have to for a paycheck except something you love to do. A real job.

My days off were not days off. They were days reserved for all the crap that had piled up while I was working. Sick days even more so.

Somewhere in there, I stuck something I wanted to do: draw. Just sit down with music in the background, pencil in one hand, sketchbook cradled in my arm, and draw.

It took a bit of searching before I found my bright, red pen. My completion pen. My 'It's done, move on' pen. Carefully, I struck the first item through.

(1) Make a list of things to do.

I took another hit of saline solution, then blew my nose out before heading to the second item on

the list:

(2) Make some tea.

Monday, 2:25pm

"Hello?" I sounded like talking motor oil when I answered the phone. Small wonder. I hadn't spoken all day outside of a thick, heavy cough.

"Hey, how you feeling?"

"Michael? Everything ok?"

"Not really. I've got to jet over to Nihon for a bit."

"What?" Ok, truth be told, it was not a big shock. Michael worked as a macroengineer for Anaheim Industries on their armored mechanoid projects. Yes, he got to build giant robots for a living. So, the company would sometimes jet him around at a moment's notice. He kept a change of clothes in his car, just in case.

"Yeah. They need me in

Osaka for final checks on the shoulder actuators. So I won't be home until Wednesday." He paused as I blew my nose out. "You feeling better?"

"Not really," I said, rubbing my temples. "Tried to take a nap but couldn't." The nap was item number seven on my list. "If this keeps up, I'm not coming into work tomorrow."

"Well, do what you have to do. Anyway, the spaceplane leaves in an hour, so I've gotta run. Take care."

"See yah," I said, disconnecting.

I slumped into my chair and sighed. Off to Nihon, to create marvels.

Lucky bastard.

Monday, 4:46pm

I glowered at the list, tapping my pencil against the edge of my desk. Clack. Clack. Clack. No rhythm but frustration guided me. Clack. Clack. Clack. Red covered the list. The first few items had long, clear strikes through



them. Surgical swaths of red. Near the bottom, I switched to quick up-and-down strokes, like bloody teeth.

One item remained untouched by red.

(17) Draw at least two pages worth of sketches.

It was my one 'fun' item. The one hobby I snuck into the list of important things to do just so I would do it without feeling too guilty. Draw two pages of stuff. Anything, as long as it came from my head and not what was in front of me.

After forty minutes, I'd managed to sketch a pair of eyes. Frustration set in. It reached critical when I barely managed a jaw-line. So, I searched for inspiration.

And, God help me, I looked for it on the Web.

The Goth'Struct Babe of the Week was my first stop. I'm not terribly Goth, myself. Too much white fur, too big and fuzzy, not lean or dark in any way. But I can appreciate the style.

Her name was Mika. She was a black Persian'Struct goth. I skipped to the the gallery page. When I saw a gallery entitled "Black Vinyl Dress" I knew where I had to go.

It was a simple collection of thumbnails. Nothing fancy. But the dress looked good on her—a black vinyl sheath that tapered off into a lace skirt decorated with mesh and floral patterns. In the first few, she wore thigh-high boots—wet black—with laces that crawled up the front like ivy. I did the usual 'click to enlarge' ritual.

The web path caught my eye. It led into an image directory. Tilting my ears, I scooted close and deleted the image name, leaving only the path to the directory.

A directory listing appeared. I almost panted from excitement. An unguarded directory was pure gold these days. I scrolled down, eyes stopping at the highlighted files, ones already used to form the page. I blinked. The thumbnail count didn't match the image count. Most of the pictures were labeled 'vdress02.img' with 't-vdress02.img' as a corresponding thumbnail.

But the thumbnails skipped about twenty or so images. And after the last thumbnail, there were a whole slew of pictures not listed on the main page.

I clicked on the first hidden image. It leapt up, like the subject had pounced me. She was smiling, unlacing her boots. In the next picture, the boots were gone. After that, the black bicycle shorts underneath her skirt.

A roar filled my ears. I forgot my cold as blood and adrenaline surged into me. My hands shook as I jumped to the next pictures, following them down the line as they got more and more explicit. The rush was terrifying. She had uploaded these

pictures for someone else—a friend, a boyfriend, someone she'd chatted with on a vid link. She thought no one else would see them.

But I was seeing them.

I dropped my sketchpad. My pencil clattered on the ground. Deep inside of me, I knew this was wrong. Pitiful and wrong. The highlight of my day would be the rush I got finding someone's stash of personal, home-made erotic photographs.

Have I fallen this far? I asked myself.

Damn straight, I answered. And I downloaded the photos.

Monday, 11:47pm

I drowned every time I closed my eyes. For a moment, just a moment, sleep would take me. I rested, maybe not as well as a pup, but well enough.

Then I choked and gasped awake, muzzle open, tongue lolling as I dragged air into my aching lungs. I poured more saline into my nose, checked the time (my medication should have kicked in ages ago) and stared at the ceiling. The cycle repeated every fifteen minutes or so until I threw myself out of bed, growling.

"Navi, on. Turn on the HTV and start surfing. Usual parameters." Flickering green light filled the room as the Navi started up and the holoprojectors keyed on. Every twenty seconds or so, the Holo-TV would change the channel. Some days, I sped up the process, creating a weird symphony of commercial noise.

I dropped my ruffled, furry butt into my office chair and leaned back, encouraging sinus drainage while commercials told me about a new prescription drug that would cure my cold, but could leave me bleeding and impotent if I looked at it funny.

Then a human face covered in short, spotty fur and a massive grin, stared at me through the noise. "God? No..."

The channel flipped. I grabbed the remote and flipped back.

An old Basset Hound'Struct in a suit leaned on a leather chair and talked to me. The extinct movie-stars channel. Well, technically it was Human Film Classics, but the other name fit well. The channel ran about two-hundred years worth of human film, from the first movies to the last digital ones before the industry was buried by SenseSyms.

The host rambled on through the usual introductory garbage. Something about common themes in films of that era: cynicism about corporate culture, spiritual bankruptcy, death of dreams, etc. It buzzed passed me like a flock of mosquitoes.

The film started. Eveline's film, as advertised on a ratty shirt curving along her too wonderful figure.

I turned off the light. The room flickered around me, like it was covered in blue fire. Crossing my legs, I leaned back and watched.

Tuesday, 8:28am

"You stopped taking the decongestants."

I opened my eyes a little. God glared at me, arms crossed, foot tapping against one of my fallen books. He looked a little fuzzy—not blurred, almost like he had fur.

"They didn't work. Wouldn't let me sleep," I said, rubbing my eyes. I shook my head, flicking my ears and trying to get an old human song out of them. "Matador!" sang the dead human. "Matador!"

"In the groceries I bought you, there was a bottle of nasal spray. Why didn't you use it?"

"Stuff's addictive. Didn't want to get hooked on it." I added a silent 'again.' He probably heard it.

"I think you didn't want to ruin a long night of movie watching with sleep," said God. "Not to say that they were bad movies, mind you, but they're not healthy viewing for someone in your condition." God's eyes pleaded for a moment. "Please trust me. You do not want to go down that path. You're ill and you need to find your way back to health again, but not like that."

"Why do you care?" I stumbled out of my room, knocking my shoulder against the door. Could barely smell anything. Or walk. The world felt like old gelatin, loose and liquid beneath the hard crust. "Oh, wait, I forgot. God cares about all his synthetic playthings." I clutched the banister and walked downstairs. Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot—the mantra of the stairs rattled in my skull.

I had to watch my step. The whole house was littered with drawings. Not good drawings, or fun drawings, but bits of imagery and rage caught by my pencil in broad, expressionist strokes. There wasn't a clean line on any of the drawings, but they caught how I felt.

Damn ocean showed up in every one, no matter what I drew.

"Do you know how many times I've had this argument?" God stood at the bottom of the stairs, arms crossed. "I'd have to use scientific notation

to write the number out. It won't work. This isn't you talking. It's the cold, the sleep deprivation and your own depression that's whining like a puppy."

God flickered again. I blinked, then wiped the back of my paws against my eyes. It wasn't God for just a half second. It didn't sound like God; anger rattled in his voice. And bitterness. It's weird, hearing your creator get snippy with you.

"Up yours, God." I walked into the kitchen and rummaged through the bags of groceries I'd left on the counter. The bottle of nasal spray tumbled onto the floor. "You know, even with the nose, I feel better now than I have in a long time. I mean, I'm drawing again! Took a night of sleep dep and Human movies, but the pencil hit paper and images came out."

"Oh, and let's not forget you're talking smack to your creator, too. Weren't brave enough to do that before you stopped sleeping," said God. I flipped my ears around. His

voice sounded wrong—fuzzy and gruff, not soft and melodious. "Not that complaining was anything new to you, but it's so much easier when no one is there to contradict you, right?"

"Look, why are you still here? Oh, wait, I called you. Summoned you..." I gritted my teeth and balled my hands, almost crushing the box of tea I'd finally found. "Well, what does it take to make you go away?" I yelled, spinning on my heel to face him.

The business end of Michael's ER117 Energy Pistol filled my vision.

A Husky'Morph in work boots, ratty jeans, ripped t-shirt and beaten leather jacket aimed the gun right between my eyes. He tilted his head, eyes and ears smiling, as if he greeted all his friends this way.

"God? God's not here," he said. "It's just you and me now, friend."

Tuesday, 10:32am

"Ok, once again: Why. Won't. You. Use. The. Spray?" He emphasized each and every word with the sway of his head, the wag of his tail and the bob of the energy pistol. And he sat there, so casual, leaning against the dining room table.

I dropped my fork onto my plate, bits of egg flying into the air like popcorn, and glared. "Tyler" just sighed. I took a swig of my tea, doing my best

**"Oh,
and let's not
forget you're
talking smack to
your creator,
too. Weren't
brave enough
to do that before
you stopped
sleeping."**

to look defiant as I drank.

Two hours ago he introduced himself as Tyler. I laughed. My long abandoned middle name found me. "By the way, I like the face you're wearing. Close enough resemblance to your sick, wayward subject to make an impact, but just enough small changes to convince me you're another person entirely. Well done." I gave him a golf clap.

"No game, friend. But I'm not talking to you until you've gotten a little more rest." And he shot me. Michael's rifle was set to a low level kinetic burst. Enough to knock a target down, or maybe pop a hole in a paper target, but not enough to hurt someone.

You could, however, knock someone unconscious if you used it at close range and knew exactly where to hit them. Tyler didn't miss his mark. The world collapsed around me, sloshing against my feet like waves.

I woke up on the couch, blanket tossed over me, with Tyler in the nearby loveseat, leafing through my sketchbook. The gun still pointed at me. Sitting up, I caught a glimpse at the settings. The safety lock was disengaged and the discharge was set at maximum.

At first, I thought he was a hallucination. Easy to have those when you're sick and exhausted. Then, I thought it was God, disguising himself, giving me a jolt so I'd jump in the right direction.

Now, it didn't matter what Tyler was. Two things had been established. First, he could affect the world. Hallucinations couldn't have moved me to the couch. Second, and most important, he meant business. At full discharge, Michael's gun had enough stopping power to kill a charging Bull lizard with one shot.

I made, and ate, breakfast at gunpoint. Every twenty minutes or so, Tyler would ask the same question. "Why won't you use the spray?" Every other time, I didn't say a thing. Just cooked and ate.

Not this time. "Why do you care? You're not real."

"Oh, that's rich!" Tyler shook his head. "What, you gonna start hopping around, saying

you don't believe in me? I thought shooting you would prove it."

"Proves nothing. I could still be asleep right now. Or hallucinating so intensely I can't tell the difference between being stunned and dragged to the couch and falling down, crawling there, and curling up for a nap." I lapped up the last of my eggs, washing it down with more tea.

"So hallucinations can't have feeling?" He clutched his heart in mock agony. "Give me a little credit. I'm as real as you are right now. And even if you are playing with an imaginary friend, the question still stands: Why won't you use the nasal spray?"

"Ask God. He knows everything. But, I'm sure you have a theory." I grabbed my plate and mug and padded back to the kitchen. Tyler kept the gun trained on me, aiming at my head as I rinsed the dishes out and set them in the washer.

"Yeah. I think you're afraid," said Tyler.

"Of getting addicted to that again? Yeah, I'll give you that." I started attacking the other dishes in the sink, punching the water temperature as high as it would go. Steam rose and drifted around my head. Condensation collected on the gun.

"No." Tyler shook his head. "You're afraid to admit why you're really sick. You're afraid to go back there."

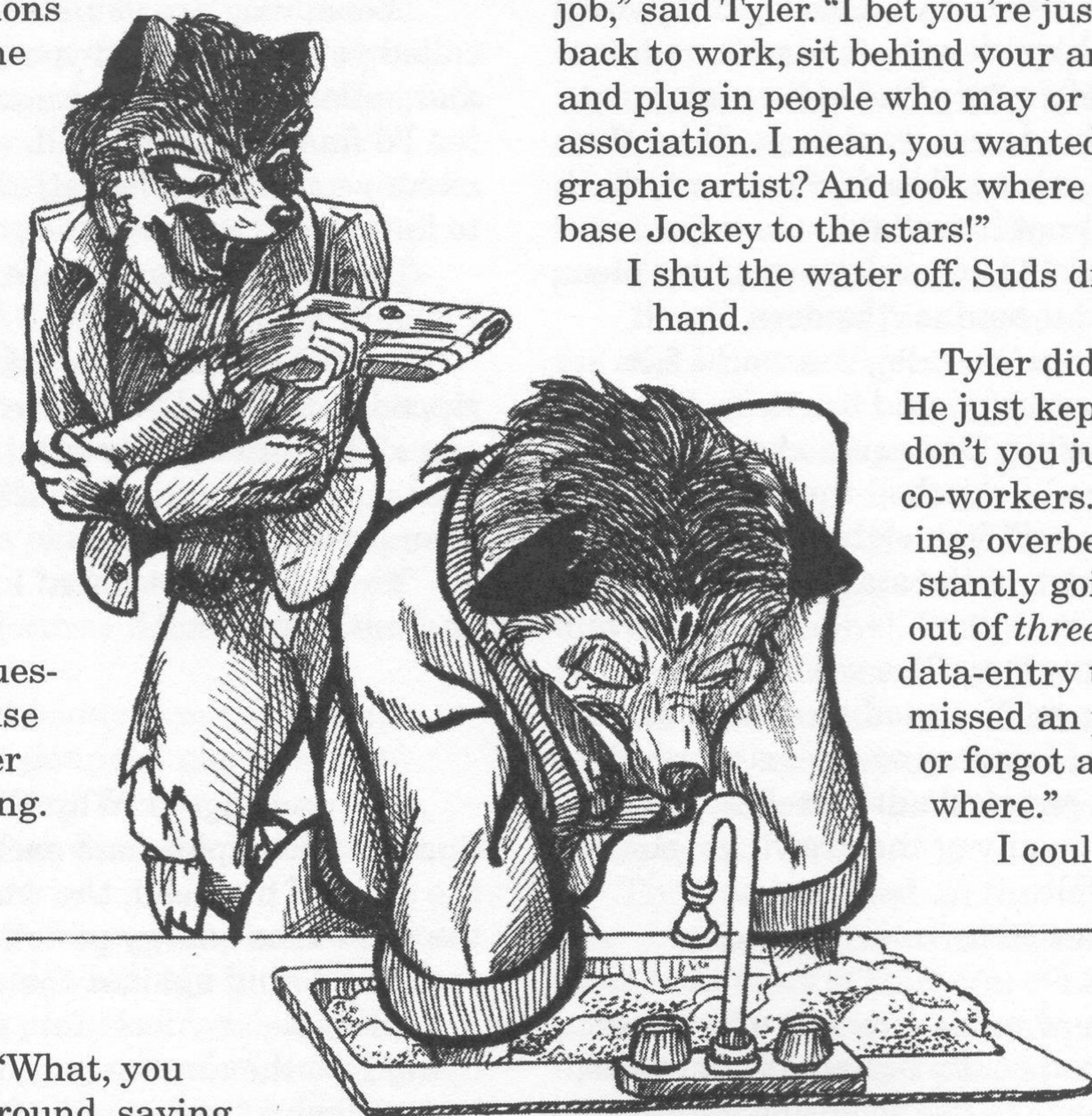
"Back where?" I didn't look at him. I just kept scrubbing.

"Oh, that soul-sucking monstrosity you call a job," said Tyler. "I bet you're just so eager to head back to work, sit behind your ancient computer and plug in people who may or may not join the association. I mean, you wanted to be, what, a graphic artist? And look where you end up—Database Jockey to the stars!"

I shut the water off. Suds dripped from my hand.

Tyler didn't notice. Or care. He just kept talking. "And don't you just love your co-workers. Loud, domineering, overbearing women constantly going crazy because, out of *three hundred* separate data-entry tasks per day, you missed an period in R.N. or forgot an asterisk somewhere."

I could sense him wagging his head and tail back and forth, mincing. "What the hell is this?" he said, imitating



one of my more annoying coworkers. ‘Can’t you read? It’s supposed to be Czankeski with an ‘e’, not Czankowski with an ‘o.’ What, is my handwriting not clear enough?’”

My jaw was gone; a taut, steel trap remained. It was clenched shut.

“I think it’s time for a little intervention, don’t you think? Ok, repeat after me: ‘I admit that I’ve wasted my life. I admit that I am a spineless creature who’s afraid of failure. I admit that I’m so scared of facing the miserable shambles that is my life, I won’t let myself recover from a cold! I admit that I am a complete and utter failure—’

And that’s when I exploded.

Blind rage. It’s a common phrase—you hear it every time someone goes feral on the highway. Deep in the back of your head, some part of your being remembers animal rage and unleashes it. Your lips curl back, pelt stands up, ears pin back, eyes catch fire, and you unleash yourself.

I went into a blind rage. I lashed out at Tyler. I remember twisting his arm, but little else. Just a heavy crunch. When my vision cleared, he was on the floor. My foot ground against his trachea. The gun’s muzzle dug into his chin and the trigger felt warm under my finger, eager to be fired.

“You know, the *worst* thing about all this? You’re right.” Tyler didn’t smile when I said that. “I admit that you’re right. I’m afraid of a lot of things. Most of all, I’m afraid it’s too late for me. But, it’s one thing when I see it in myself. It’s another to have the likes of you shove it into my face.”

“So,” growled Tyler. “Whatcha gonna do about it?”

“I’ll figure something out,” I said. “But, first, I’m gonna get rid of you.”

I turned the gun around, shoved the muzzle against my chin, and pulled the trigger.

The ocean erupted from everything around me and swept me away.

Tuesday, 12:47pm

An angel looked down on me and said, “Oi. You ok?”

My first thought was, *Hey, since when did angels wear caps?* You can guess my second thought. After a while, my eyes cleared. Eveline, the woman from G.O.D., held my head upright. I sat up and took a deep breath, through my nose, and smelled the ocean.

A bottle of nasal spray rolled off my chest.

I said something. Sounded like “Murflung” but I couldn’t be sure. My mouth was full of rock salt. Eveline helped me up. She gawked at the house all the while. Pictures covered every surface—hard,

angry sketches of Tyler, myself, God—all in thick, black pencil—all tacked to every open surface with poster putty.

“Nice art. Kinda expressionist. Reminds me of this one on-line comic I saw...” I grunted something and pointed to a bottle of orange juice wedged into the couch cushions. “Oh, gotcha.” She handed it to me and kept on talking as I chugged. “Anyway, I got this call asking that I deliver more groceries to you and, when I got here, I saw you on the floor. The door was wide open so I came in here and... are you ok?”

“I’m...” I shuddered. Gravel covered my vocal chords. “Well, you caught me at a very weird time in my life.”

She laughed. She got the joke and she laughed a wonderful, rich laugh. For some insane reason, this entire strange tableau did not freak her out. Her ears were erect with curiosity. She wagged her tail and she smiled at me.

And, somehow, she was happy. Even with her crappy job, having to deal with crap like this day in and day out, she was happy.

“You need anything?” she asked.

When I opened my mouth to answer, I thought I saw God from the corner of my eye. He stood, arms crossed, worry lines crossing His face. As if he were waiting for something.

“I could use a lot of things. Happiness. Job I love...”

“Sorry,” she said. “Can’t deliver any of those.”

“No. Didn’t think you could.” I smiled. “Could you get me the phone?”

“Sure.”

I dialed work. The office manager picked up. “Hi. Yeah, it’s me. How’s everything? Uh-huh. Great. Look, I think I need a little more time. Don’t know when this is going to go away.”

“Well?” whispered Eveline.

“Ok. I’ll try to be back on Friday,” I said, and hung up. “I’ve got some time.”

“Time?”

“Yeah, to get my head together, my house together... my resume together.” I scrubbed my fur back into place. “So, need any help with those extra groceries?”

“Sure,” she said, moving towards the door. I looked behind me. God smiled from his seat on my ottoman. I pointed to him, silently asking him “Was it you?”

He shook his head and pointed right back at me.

I grinned, turned around, and followed the angel Eveline outside.





The End of the Labyrinth

by Michael R. Gist

illustrated by Cara Mitten

Michael R. Gist lives in the redwood empire of northern California. He is a member of the HWA and has served as a panel chair at the World Horror Convention. His fiction has appeared in *Weird Tales* and *Black Gate*. You can visit his website at www.michaelrgist.com.

Cara Mitten is becoming well known for her distinctive illustration style, and has been featured twice before in *Anthrolations*. She recently relocated to Athens, GA on account of it having a more varied music scene than Wisconsin; and shares space with a snake and multiple birds. Much more of her artwork can be found online at <http://yerf.com/mittcara>.

*T*he Amazing Pan flexed and unflexed his hands. Sweat greased his long square-tipped fingers. His palms were hot. His back shivered as though a ghost had touched him. He was at a dead end.

It was time for Russian roulette.

He chambered a lone bullet into his thirty-eight and spun the cylinder. He had a one in six chance of death. Or a five in six chance of turning thief. He didn't know which was better.

The weight of the gun pulled his right hand down to his side. He put the gun down and scrubbed both hands dry against his furry legs. No slip-ups allowed.

Picking up the weapon, Pan trudged from the small above-ground pool outside his trailer to a set of lawn furniture under a moss-laced shade tree. The Florida sun sucked the energy out of the earth, leaving the day uncomfortably hot and sticky.

He sat down awkwardly. His well-muscled goat haunches scrunched into the chair. His shiny, black, cloven hooves barely touched ground.

He was forever half and half.

Half man.

Half goat.

Half assed about everything he did.

A cluster of flies circled, then landed on his legs, nipping at the tender skin beneath. He picked up a can of bug spray and spritzed the air with a lethal cloud. He didn't want his body to be found blanketed with bugs.

Pan's lips curled in a familiar pang of self-disgust. Perhaps he was too chicken to go through with it. Perhaps, underneath it all, he deserved to be a slave.

He snatched up a warm beer, slugged it down, and raised the gun to his head. The cold circle of

metal frosted his temple. Oh yes, God—he *could* do it!

His finger squeezed the trigger.

Click.

The hollow sound slammed through his head. He heard himself suck in a ragged breath. In slow motion, he let his hand fall. Runnels of sweat and tears streaked his face and bounced onto his chest.

Fate, Fortune, or whatever, had chosen to spare his life.

He would turn thief.

He went in the trailer and picked up the phone.



Fifteen minutes later, Pan sat in the same chair, grinning at his friend, Baltazar. Life had taken on a new more vivid tone now that he was committed to moving forward, to exiting the shifting tunnels his life had fallen into.

"When we get the money, we can go anywhere we want," Baltazar said. He gulped on his beer. He was a large man, naked except for a green bikini thong. He was fifty, but it was hard to see his age. The kaleidoscope of tattoos that covered his body made him seem dressed even when he wasn't. And his two pale gray eyes peered out of a mass of indecipherable designs and colors.

Pan stood up on dainty hooves, scratched himself and sat back down. The graft fit perfectly. His goat-half blended seamlessly into his human torso. But it itched now and again. It was the price of being part animal.

Baltazar's eyes slid away with revulsion.

"We can't hide," Pan said. "Or have normal lives. At least not me. People are going to stare at me wherever I go—and I'm not the only one." Without thinking, he took up a fine-toothed grooming comb and pulled it through the rusty brown hair on his legs. The motion soothed his nerves and kept the flies at bay. "I wouldn't mind being

what I am if I was seeing any profit." He growled. His manager, Victor Lansing, had him in a slave contract that left him almost none of his own earnings. That bastard had started him down these dark corridors of servitude. But all that was going to change.

Baltazar didn't say anything. His muscles tensed with hostility at the mention of their mutual enemy. He had his own beef with Victor.

Pan smiled. He didn't know what it was, exactly, that made Baltazar hate Lansing, and he didn't care. It was an unwritten law that no personal questions were asked among circus and carnival people.

It was a good rule.

Pan rubbed his coarse hair. As much as he liked and depended on Baltazar, he didn't think his partner understood the betrayal. "I remember the surgery, but I sure as hell don't remember signing over my income to Victor."

"He's got it in writing," Baltazar said flatly. "I saw it once."

Pan shook his head violently. He thought of all the money he'd earned and never seen. "It's mine. It's all mine."

Baltazar's eyes lit up. "Yes, yes, that's it," he said. "Hang onto that feeling, Pal. He owes you. He owes *us*. We'll rip open that safe and he won't have the guts to complain. It's common knowledge he's a tax evader. He could never explain the cash he's hoarding." He rubbed his bald tattooed head and thumped his chest. "Why, we'll be in and out of there in no time. It'll take more than Victor Lansing to best Baltazar Roncolli. I've mapped his estate. He thinks he's got an impenetrable maze there, but I can walk us through it blindfolded." He kissed his fingertips. "He's crazy, but I'm crazier." He flashed a mouthful of white teeth.

"You promised—no violence."

"And I'll keep my word. He ain't even going to be there, remember?"

Pan sucked in his breath, leaned back and closed his eyes. He didn't want Baltazar to read the emotions stirring within. The whole project terrified him. He had never committed a crime in his life. He had to fight down his fear of humiliation, arrest and a prison sentence. Alone, he could never hope to get revenge. Let alone the cash money. To do that, he needed the older man's strength and courage.

"When I was touring Europe," Pan said. "I found a place in Spain where Monica and I could be happy. It's an isolated villa. It's built of lustrous white plaster that shines in the sun. A beautiful place high on a rocky mountainside overlooking a small village. Monica's never been to Spain, but she speaks the language, and she always

talked about going there. She doesn't know I put a deposit on the place. But to complete the deal, we have to get there—soon." He picked up his fly swatter and fanned the air. This was the first time he'd spoken of his dream, his motive for becoming a thief.

Baltazar nodded. "I'm thinking I could get a little farm in the country with a cow and a few horses."

Pan almost laughed, but there was little humor in his mood. It had been the last thing he'd expected to hear. Baltazar's dream was so commonplace. So was his, for that matter. Two simple men with simple dreams that were about to commit a heavy duty crime, one that could put them both away for a very long time.

"Monica wants to have a child," Pan said, using the words like an incantation to drive off his fears and bolster his resolve. He had to have money for the genetic engineering. Natural reproduction had been lopped off, along with everything else below the waist.

"God Almighty," Baltazar said. He reached over and gripped Pan's arm.



Later that night the glow of a cheddar moon lit the circus grounds. The huge tents, with their peaked roofs, stood like a nomadic camp. A warm breeze failed to blow away the comforting smell of the animals corralled nearby. Pan stopped to listen as an elephant trumpeted, her cry was answered by a series of muffled tiger roars.

Baltazar grabbed hold of Pan to prod him onward. Dressed in black, they wore backpacks and carried night goggles. But Pan didn't think he would need them. His night vision was excellent. His problem was dogs. If they picked up his scent, they would set up a howl, or worse yet, chase him. He had doused himself with some of his odor-drowning bug spray to throw them off. At his waist, a can of mace served as backup.

Creeping, the pair moved past the empty fairway.

The small houses and trailers ahead made up the winter quarters of the carnival and circus people. He pictured his friends sleeping peacefully. Hilda Nesbith, the bearded lady, had been the maid of honor at his wedding. Her husband, Apollo, The Man Who Eats Steel, had been the best man. They, and all the carnival people, had closed ranks around him when he'd first come here. They had given him the courage and strength to become the greatest sideshow entertainer in a hundred years. They had opened their arms and hearts, had taken him into their lives and shared whatever they had with him. And he'd taken it all gratefully. Tears stung his eyes. He

was leaving the only family he had known since his surgery. He looked back at the large sign rocking in the warm breeze.

THE AMAZING PAN!

HALF GOAT! HALF MAN!

Half wit. First, for letting Victor dupe him into his contract. And now, for turning to crime to solve it. His shoulders sagged.

He started to speak, to call the whole thing off, but Baltazar put his hand across Pan's mouth and led him through the trailers. Snoring wafted through the open windows and from sleeping pallets on the open ground. The weather was warm. No one was locked up tonight.

He could barely breathe. The pressure of Baltazar's big hand latched onto the lump of fear in his throat, strangling him. After a few more steps, dogs began to bark. Lights went on. Doors slammed. Angry voices called out. He tried to wiggle free.

Any second, they would be discovered.

Baltazar scooped Pan up over his shoulders like a sack of meal. Running from one shadow to another, he pushed on. Then he paused and looked back.

No one followed.

Pan waited to be put down. Instead, his partner toted him the rest of the way to the Lansing estate. Here, he was finally placed on the ground—standing face to face with a wall of hedge.

"Here goes nothing," Baltazar whispered.



An hour later, Pan's hooves sunk into the spongy earth. He was slightly dizzy from the heavy aroma of night-blooming jasmine and all the excitement that had taken place. Standing outside Victor Lansing's mansion, he could hardly believe it was over. Stealing was a lot simpler than he had ever imagined.

Still, his heady elation was tainted by a few misgivings.

Baltazar had successfully navigated the maze, killed the alarm system, and opened the safe. Meanwhile, Pan had shined his light on several valuable paintings and antiques. How could a man as cruel and ruthless as Lansing leave this stuff so poorly guarded, he had wondered.

Now that he was outside, the logic of his thoughts began to haunt him. He started to speak, to express his worry. To tell Baltazar that a little voice of common sense was whispering that

the whole operation had been too easy. But he remained silent. He wanted Baltazar to think he was made of firmer stuff. He was well aware that so far he'd been more of a hindrance than a help.

Away from the mansion, he took a moment to heft his heavily laden backpack higher up on his shoulder. Baltazar was right ahead of him.

He glanced around. Everything was the same. He hunched his back and hurried on. All they had to do was walk out. This was no time for him to panic.

As they entered the hedgerow labyrinth, Pan began to sweat. The dark brambles of the maze seemed to reach out like fingers, trying to impede him. The moonlight became an accusing spotlight. The ground was a washboard of uneven slipperiness.

Intent on fighting off his melancholy thoughts, he became distracted. He lost footing. His narrow inadequate shoulders slumped. His booty dragged him over.

Tumbling, he slammed onto the moist ground. A thick blanket of decaying leaves cushioned the blow and muffled the sound.

No!

He struggled to his hooves. Baltazar was well ahead already. He bit his tongue to keep from calling out, afraid of giving himself away. He was in the midst of a crime, after all.

When he looked back the way he had come, the old mansion loomed against the night sky like a derelict river boat. The curlicues on the upper veranda protruded like grinning teeth. They laughed at him. Mocked him.

Frightened, Pan reshuffled his load and hoisted it on his back. He couldn't stay where he was. Daylight would come, and with it, discovery. He would be turned over to Victor Lansing. Horrified at that thought, he charged forward, following the path to his left, certain that Baltazar had disappeared in that direction.

He dashed down the passageway. He was sure he heard the thud, thud, thud, of Baltazar's footsteps. He rushed ahead, awash with relief. He turned the corner and ran straight on until the path forked. At the next intersection, Baltazar was still to his left. He didn't hesitate, he veered into the next path.

Again and again, at each point, he thought he was about to catch up to Baltazar.

But he never did.

He could barely breathe. The pressure of Baltazar's big hand latched onto the lump of fear in his throat, strangling him.

Winded, he finally stopped. His heart beat an anxious tattoo against his ribs. He'd gone too fast. Made too many turns without thinking. All the hedges looked the same.

He was lost.

He sat down and looked at the moon. It hung in the sky, unperturbed by the machinations of mere mortals below. He thought of his beloved Monica and his stomach did a flip-flop. How could he ever face her? He closed his eyes, imagining her look of disappointment. She would never understand his turning to crime. He would be better off dead than caught out here with a bag full of stolen money, even if it was rightfully his.

He slowed his breathing. He had to use his head.

The part of him he thought of as "the animal" was keenly aware of things moving in the jungle-like trees and foliage beyond the maze. Things that could wander in here with him. He heard the familiar grunt of an alligator. That was bad enough. But pits and booby traps were more likely to bring about his end.

He walked a few feet, then listened. Brush rustled nearby. He could feel the heat of another body, smell something. It was large enough to be a man.

"Balt?" he whispered. "Can you hear me? Where are you?" He didn't dare call out and give himself away. It could be Lansing instead of his friend.

"Balt?"

Something broke from cover. Running feet were so near he turned in a circle, expecting Baltazar to burst into view.

Instead, a bone-chilling scream pierced the night. Long and throaty, the pitch rose higher and higher. Then a crash. The hedgerows shook.

Gurgling came next. Weaker, angry, surprised. It was Baltazar. The bastard Lansing had him, but where?

"Balt! Balt!" Pan cried out in desperation, "Where are you!"

He ran blindly, in the direction of the moans. He cut around corners right and left. He stumbled, fell and got up again. He jumped two staked pits and kept going.

Baltazar let out a howl of agony. A death cry. The horrid sound rose and fell—and then there was silence.

Pan buried his hands in the hedge as if he could reach through and touch his friend. He threw himself against the tangled wall, but it stood like steel. Sobbing, he finally fell to the ground. The night creatures seemed to be holding their breath. The silence was profound.

Wherever Baltazar was, his fight was over.

Pan lay prostrate for precious minutes. The facts came to him in bits and pieces, like Baltazar was whispering in his ear. He was in grave danger. Lansing had killed his friend. And Lansing knew the layout of the maze.

Pan tried to remain calm. He knew he had little chance otherwise. He rose slowly and inched forward, angling toward what he thought was an outer wall. He put out his hand and dragged it along, never letting it fall from the touch of the hedge leaves. He walked for what seemed like hours. He followed his course forlornly, praying that he'd stumble across the entrance.

And then,
like a miracle,
there it was.

He could scarcely believe his luck. Before him, down this very path, was a visible gate. He sucked in his breath and let out a long sigh. He was almost out.

Nearly falling over himself, he scrambled toward freedom. As he approached, he barely noticed the shadow blocking his way.

Until it moved.

This wasn't Lansing. It was much too big. Lansing was a small ugly man.

Pan pulled up. He wished he'd brought a gun. Instead, all he had was his mace.

The figure moved again, black and powerful. The light played over muscle and bone. Inky black fur maned an inhuman face. Two horns stabbed at the sky, drenched in blood. A slobbering muzzle. A thick neck on broad shoulders.

A deformed man?

No.

A bull.

No—

A minotaur!

Pan almost fainted.

Snorting, panting, wild eyes glowering, the insane animal searched for a new victim. Ears pricked forward, toward the wall where Pan wanted to go, toward something Pan couldn't see.

Pan didn't wait to see who or what it was at the wall. Encouraged by the distraction, he was spurred on by some deep instinct. The minotaur was not a beastly man like himself, but a *manlike beast*—a fierce deadly animal.

He leaped from his hiding place, bent down, pumped his arms and ran to get by.

The minotaur's beady eyes tracked him. With a bellow of rage, the beast aimed and charged.

Pan turned to face his adversary at the last second.

As they locked together, Pan's used his arms to bulldog the minotaur's horns. They pushed and pulled back and forth, each one fighting for footing

on the yielding ground. The powerful beast drove Pan back, almost wedging him against a hedge. Pan brought up a goat hoof, raking the human chest.

The pair slammed into the hedge, almost burying Pan inside. The minotaur pulled back—and Pan kicked into the bull's face, gouging an eye.

The creature roared in pain, backed off, shook its head, and snorted puffs of steaming hot breath. Sprays of blood and spittle clouded the air.

Separated, Pan circled. The minotaur's head followed. He'd miraculously escaped the first charge. He couldn't afford to let it line him up for another.

Then he tripped.

The minotaur lowered its head and rushed in. Its muzzle hadn't dipped far enough. Pan slid underneath, escaping the horns.

He leaped forward and bear-hugged the bull-man, pinning his arms to his sides. The beast tried to lower its horns, huffing and puffing with rage.

Pan felt himself weakening. His arms were almost numb. He thought of Monica and the life he had hoped they would share. Now he was dying for his dream. He mourned the things that could have been. He lost his grip. Bull slobber and hot breath cascaded around him. The first horn knicked his forehead. His own blood ran down his face and into the corner of his mouth. The heart went out of him. He closed his eyes and waited.

Above him, the minotaur bellowed.

Arching its back away from Pan, lifting him from the ground, the beast released Pan and pulled away. Its face contorted in agony. Its tongue wagged back and forth.

In astonishment, Pan watched helplessly.

The bull-man fell to the ground, thrashing wildly. Arms and legs jerked spasmodically. A series of shudders accented a last bellow of impotent rage and confusion.

The minotaur was dead.

Bewildered, Pan stayed on the ground, staring in astonishment.

The Medusa brushed off her clothing. Her snakes coiled and uncoiled from her head. Deadly asp fangs dripped with newly released venom.

"There, there, my babies. Hush, my little ones," she crooned. The small but deadly coven wove between her fingers as they settled themselves. Her stony gaze nailed Pan to the ground.

"How did you know?" Pan asked.

"People gossip," she said, approaching. "Especially about money."

Pan put up a hand, defensively.

"What's this?" she asked, bending down.

Pan sat up on his elbows. "So, you do understand?"

"Yes. Completely."

He moved his hand aside, and they kissed.

"Oh, Monica—"

Helping him up, Monica handed him a pair of plane tickets. He read the destination on them, and it was Spain. She had known everything all along.

Together, the couple faced the dawn twilight and the final hedgerow. Pan remembered all the twists and turns that had led him here. He thought of his wrong choices and his many faults. In truth, in many ways, he knew he didn't deserve a second chance.

Hesitating, he shifted the money-laden backpack one last time.

Then he stepped through the opening—and out of the labyrinth—forever.





Morning After

by Arthur Lee

illustrated by Jen Seng

A student of no particular renown in a town of no particular significance in Southern-Central California, Arthur Lee firmly believes that anyone can write well with a little effort and practice, and often offers one-on-one advice for any comers. Despite batting a career zero for stable relationships, he is usually a hopeless romantic and urges any and all of his readers to cherish the magic in their lives, whether romantic or otherwise.

Sometimes sweet, sometimes sexy, sometimes sardonic, but always Spunky! Jen considers herself a pretty outgoing, friendly person, and tries to convey that through her illustrations. Outside of her artistic career, Jen enjoys pursuits ranging from bungee running to wrestling to just relaxing in a beanbag chair and talking about nothing with her friends. Visit her very spiffy website at www.toonapalooza.net

It has been said that life is an immense practical joke by the general, at the expense of the particular. That's certainly been true in my case. I, Felix de Molay, am perhaps one of the first Children of the Internet. My parents met on a mailing list way back when the Net was a relatively small group of university geeks who sat around exchanging computer services, data, bad jokes, and Dungeons and Dragons scenarios. Heinlein, Asimov, and that ever-present herald of the Digital Era, *Neuromancer*, were my first bedtime stories, and I was the first on the block to get a Macintosh when Steve Jobs made that epic announcement. I had no idea what it was, but it played Space Invaders, and that was good enough for me. This is the sort of thing that happens when you have technohippie parents. It is ironic, then, that the story of my existence, owing so much to rationalist scientific thought, is bound by what many decry as pseudomystical babble.

Despite my upbringing as one of the *digerati*, I've always found the electronic medium a little lacking. I'm a very sensual person. It isn't enough to read the text: my greatest pleasure springs from the heavy feel of books in my hands, the soft rustle of paper as the pages turn beneath my fingers, or the delicate scent of an aged volume like the bouquet of a fine wine. Every book has a different scent, you know. The first prints of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy have an exotic, cinnamon smell, while *On the Road* is deeper and earthier, almost like fresh-tilled earth. There's something almost erotic about writing letters and journals, something in the soft scratch of an elegant fountain-pen against the deliciously textured surface of fine linen paper, or in the gentle flow of words from your fingertips, immortalizing a tiny fraction of your soul in the process.

For as long as I can remember, I've been a bibliophile. When I was six, my parents gave me a first-print copy of *Neuromancer*. By the time I turned eight, I had filled two bookshelves with my volumes, saving every penny I could to find the next title and devour its contents, savoring the delightful sensations that it had to offer. By the time I was twelve, I knew every used-book dealer in town on a first-name basis. Daryl even kept a little shelf for books he thought I might like, and let me work for books through high school.

This, really, is where the joke begins. I don't know how the story got started that dogs don't like cats. They certainly liked this Cat. Ever since I was a little boy, I've never met a dog that didn't like me. Pit bulls that scared even their owners would run over to me and beg to play. This wasn't exactly a good thing, mind you. I grew up in a pretty yuppie neighborhood, and ninety-odd percent of the dogs were either shaved yapping rats or mops looking for handles. My problem, of course, was that the vast majority of these dogs were brick stupid. All domestic dogs descended from the wolf, you see, and, as a rule of thumb, the further you get from that basic model, the stupider and droolier you get. Multiply this by the twenty or so dogs on the block and you wind up with an awfully bad impression of canine-dom, whether you're named 'cat' or not. Let me tell you, it was a real pisser, walking around the neighborhood like the Pied Piper for a bunch of inbred drool factories.

But then one year I visited a cousin of mine in Montana. He kept huskies. Delightful dogs, huskies are. They're intelligent, affectionate, and very wolfish. One of his bitches had pups that year, and he let me take one of them home. I wound up with Laika, a beautiful light-grey Siberian of sweet blue-eyed appearance and even sweeter temperament. She was the one dog I really liked,

and seemed almost human sometimes. Most of the time, we'd be inseparable. She'd sit and watch as I read, did homework or whatever. We played for hours in the park. She even slept with me, crawling up on top of the covers, resting her head on my chest. On cold nights, she'd burrow underneath and sleep there, always waking me in the morning with a few pleasant slurps.

As I went through high school, I fell in and out of love repeatedly, averaging five or six semiserious romances a year, and six or seven breakups (don't ask how that happened). Sometimes, when I left on a date, I thought Laika looked almost jealous, but I filed it away as delusion.

I went to college, spent a year in the dorms, missed Laika, and got a nice two-bedroom apartment with one of my friends the next year, largely so I could bring her. I graduated somewhere in the upper-middle of the class with a Master's in Biochem. I got a decent research position at one of the genelabs. It paid pretty well and kept my book collection growing, but I wasn't exactly going to be driving around in an Aston Martin anytime soon.

It was a fulfilling job but had its share of problems. Big cities attract more than their share of whackos, you see, and a lot of them wind up thinking that biotech is the cure for all their problems. The irritating thing is that most of them don't make interview appointments to ask their questions. They barge in and demand to speak with someone, or they wait outside and come up to you as you're getting into your car. We got PETA activists who thought that using animals for tests was immoral, and people who wanted genetic restructuring because they swore up and down the street that they were actually animals. Typically, you find people who think they're dogs or cats. Once in a while, you get a particularly bizarre one, like a three-toed sloth or a possum. And once, right after the news about the Human Genome Project broke, I got a nutjob who was convinced that I could actually engineer a sort of human-vulpine cross from scratch, like a foxish Lola Bunny. It had been a rough day, and I don't think I let him down half as gently as I probably should have. He didn't seem too dismayed, though. "It'll happen one day," he said. "You'll see." It sounded almost damning, like the infamous warning about the Ides of March.



But I'm digressing. About two months ago, I had a birthday. Curiously enough, it was Laika's, too. Strange coincidences. Kate, my college sweetheart and then-girlfriend took me out to dinner, and didn't seem to mind when I stopped on the way back to pick up a nice sirloin for my husky. We

went back to my apartment and played with Laika for about twenty minutes, then left to my bedroom so I could 'unwrap presents'. Laika whined slightly when we closed the door on her, but quieted soon, understanding that I had to do it. See, Kate has an allergy to dog fur. She takes medication for it, but it's still best for her not to spend long periods in the same room with a dog around. It was quiet until about 3 AM, when one of the bolts in my bed snapped, sending Kate and me to the floor in a rather loudly giggling heap of skin, sheets, and leather. Interesting night.

The next day, Jeremy, one of my bookdealing friends, brought me a small stack of some particularly old texts that he had recently acquired and thought that I might enjoy. They were really very nice, an old leather-bound *Alice in Wonderland*, a copy of *Foucault's Pendulum*, and a few other texts. One of them in particular caught my eye. It was an incredibly old-looking volume, and looked more like a journal or sketchbook than anything else, filled with weird diagrams and bizarre formulae that didn't equate and should never have even begun to approach the described effects. I asked Jeremy about it, but he said he'd never seen it before in his life. It probably doesn't matter anymore.

The flyleaf was in one of those Gothic, heavily decorated German typefaces and mentioned something about Utility Magic. It sounded pretty interesting to me, so I got out some notepaper and started translating. As far as magic goes, I suppose it was pretty basic stuff—no daemonic rituals that I could find, no fireballs... none of the stock fantasy literature staples. But it was a lot more useful to me. What can you really do with a fireball anyways? You can't exactly blow up someone's house without the police coming around asking questions. What I had available was really more practical. Brightening a room without having to get up and turn the lights on, sealing up small cuts, prepping yourself for a day without going through the monotony of shaving and stuff... they're all incredibly useful, if minor.

If I'd really understood it, in retrospect, I would've burned the book the first day, qualms about bookburning as a cardinal sin notwithstanding. Really, it's interesting. We live in a society where incredible amounts of power are being thrown around like children's toys. We play Counterstrike and Diablo II on computers reaching into the gigahertz range... and never understand how much power a gigahertz really is, or how many geniuses only thirty or forty years ago would've given their right arms for even half that. Cruising down the highway at sixty-five is nothing special; we do it every day. But a collision at even half that

is like falling off a three-story building. And, like the man who drives around at seventy-five until an accident nearly destroys his life, I carried the book around with me without a thought to how much damage it might do.

I should really get back to explaining the joke, I think. I've rambled about my life enough now. One of the spells was particularly useful. It helped mend broken things, by rejoining parts.

Well, one night, I was working late in the lab, tinkering with one of my pet hypotheses. I'd brought Laika—it's against regulations, I know, but she's always been perfectly well behaved, and I needed the company. She was on a leash, anyways, and the boss had never minded, so long as she stayed out of the clean areas and out of people's ways.

Anyhow, I brought out one of my test subjects, a big German Shepard, for blood tests. He was a friendly guy, so it didn't take long to get him up on the table. I turned around to get a syringe... and... crash. By the time I turned back around, he'd sent a centrifuge to the ground, courtesy of a certain wagging tail. Now, centrifuges are anything but cheap, and it was entirely too late to go scrounging for another one, so I put all the pieces into a fairly neat pile and dragged out my little spellbook for the fixit spell.

This, of course, would have to be the first time a dog ever did something that really screwed me up. Laika was circling, and had wound her leash around my legs. Right as I was about to finish my incantation, the German decided to jump up on me, knocking me over. I think I did a fair impression of Bruce Campbell as Ash there, badly flubbing the last few syllables. Pieces of centrifuge, broken lab equipment, and German Shepard went everywhere as the book exploded with a furious roar and a flash of light. I was knocked back into a doorframe, and everything went dark for a while.

The next part I'm not too clear about. I remember pain. I remember a lot of pain. My jaw felt like someone had wired it shut and was forcibly opening it again with a crowbar, exploding it into a rain of white-hot jagged glass edges. I remember my ears being smashed into the sides of my skull with sledgehammers and being pulled out anew on top of my head, and I remember my spine being stretched out, almost as if someone had tied my tailbone to the back end of a runaway locomotive. My skin felt as if a million salt-tipped

needles had been driven into it. My feet were crushed, and I felt sudden release as they burst my shoes. More than anything, though, I remember the scream. It was a newborn's first cry and a death rattle rolled into a horrible one, shrieking out of my throat and turning into a tortured howl before I realized it was mine.



I must've driven home in that fog of pain, because I remember crashing into bed and the blissful oblivion of sleep. The blinding stab of sunlight awakened me the next morning. Laika. Had I forgotten Laika? Panic set in, and I stumbled to the bathroom, rubbing the sleep from my eyes with soft-furred hands. Fur. I blinked a few times, staring at the unfamiliar face in the mirror. Mocha-brown eyes had replaced my familiar light-steel blues. Worse still, the average-but-still-distinctly-human lines of my face had given way to something distinctively canine, strongly

reminiscent of the Shepard from the night before. Coal-black fur covered my face, fading to a dark ginger over my nose—my muzzle, rather—and throat. It framed my new, heavier, pointed teeth, and the long tongue that lolled out from between them. I could sense a tail emerging from the base of my spine, emerging through a tear in my jeans. I touched my cheek. Fur. The reality hit me like a ton of lead bricks, and the floor came surging up to reach me. Oh, cruelest of ironies... Born as Cat, and despising most dogs, I had become what I would least have desired.

When I came to, my eyes had returned to normal, though my face had remained the same, save for a shift to grey-and-white fur. Or at least that's what I thought for a moment. The face seemed gentler somehow, more feminine, with higher, elegant cheekbones. A delicate hand stroked my cheek, the face smiling slightly. "It's OK, Felix. You're safe, and you'll be just fine in a moment. It's me, Laika, and I'm going to take care of you until you get used to it."

"Buh ooh canh bh Lkh. Lkh eh." I tripped over the words, my mouth utterly alien. Gesturing, I tried to explain Laika's state as I last remembered her. My rescuer, however, only grinned, raising her chin so I could see the black silver-tagged collar that lay nestled in the silken fur. It had been loosened a few notches, but was definitely the same piece of material I had hung around her

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neck so many years before. As if to further prove her identity, she turned my head to one side, lapping at my cheek in the same way she had since she'd been a pup.

What could I do? I hugged her to me, soliciting a low, comforting murr. The other thing I got was a sudden revelation: Laika hadn't just become half-human, but a rather attractive half-human at that, with full, deliciously firm curves and a light, supple waist that fit perfectly in my arms. I don't think it helped as much as it sounds, though.

They say that a hug from someone who cares about you is one of the most powerful comforting forces in the world, and I'm extremely grateful to Laika for being there, because I really don't think I'd have come out as well as I did without her. After lying there for about twenty minutes and coming to a rather shaky grip on my situation, I managed to get up and fix a little breakfast. Stopping halfway through my routine of cracking open a can of Alpo for Laika, I made instead a proteinous breakfast for two. Four eggs, three sausages and a warm buttered piece of toast later, I got up to help her with her fork. It's really surprising what you take for granted, being used to opposable thumbs and actual fingers.

With a delicious load of calories under my belt, I flopped down on the couch to take stock of what had happened to me. The simple fact was that I didn't even look remotely human anymore. Ignoble as it may sound, my safety was my first concern. Racist groups, particularly violent ones, tend to justify their acts by classifying their targets as sub-human, more monkey than man. How might they react to someone very obviously not even monkey, but part dog? I shuddered at the thought, and hurried to the lab. Health or no, a ten-gauge shotgun slug would kill me an awful lot faster than any disorders I'd picked up. If I could find some genetic basis to declare myself human, I might at least be able to get some governmental protection. It was Saturday, so I left Laika at the apartment and drove down myself. It's normally a five-minute drive, but I was scared shitless of being seen and spent nearly five times that weaving through back alleys and ducking into parking garages. Twice, the cops nearly saw me. Not good.

Fortunately, my retinas hadn't changed, and the locks let me in.

I drew a blood sample and waited, doing what basic health tests I could. Even if they were completely useless, the likely situation, it made me feel better that they came back with a verdict of roughly good health. The results came in about an hour later, and my heart sank. Everything was completely wrong. I even had extra chromosomes, wielding an incredible seven over the usual

complement of 23. They had shifted dramatically, growing from normal X'es to bizarre asterisk-shaped clumps of genetic material.

I had essentially lost my membership card in the human race; any rights, even life itself, were gifts. Insist as I might to my basic humanity, the visual and scientific evidence would coldly testify against me.



I drove home again, numbly, meandering through the maze of alleys like a rat in a twisted lab experiment. Once I got home, I tried to set a rough plan, getting a clipboard to start a checklist. Laika padded over and laid her head in my lap, as was her custom. It was a feeling at once comfortingly familiar and disturbingly arousing. A few minutes later, I realized that she was still very much naked, and I led her into my room to find something acceptable, until I could get her clothes of her own. Leaving her to choose, I called Kate. As my lover, she should be the first to know and might be supportive, I thought. Having gotten somewhat used to my canine mouth, I asked her over.

"Kate? This is Felix. I need you to come over... You should know about this. There was an accident at the lab."

"Oh, no... Hon, are you hurt?"

"A bit. I think you should see it."

"Alright, love. I'll be over in ten."

I got a sheet from my bed, checking on Laika in the process. She was still trying on different things (A feminine instinct, I guess), so I let her be. The sheet made a passing cloak; I didn't want Kate to be too shocked, and I definitely wanted her to be sitting when she got the news. Tea had soothed us both through rough spots before, so I made a pot of her favorite blend. Ten minutes later, as the warm scent of raspberry filled the air, the doorbell rang. That was surprising; even in nearly empty traffic, it typically took fifteen minutes to make the drive. She must've sped the entire way. Somehow, the thought comforted me. Even when your body's been mangled beyond recognition, you can barely speak, and even your DNA isn't entirely your own anymore, it's good to be cared about. I drew my makeshift cloak closer around me and opened the door, looking through its folds at her beautiful, worried face.

"Please, Kate. Come in. Sit down. Have some tea."

"Felix? Is that you? Are you all right?" She let me gently steer her over to the couch. "I've been worried... Please tell me it isn't that bad..." She sneezed. "Oh, do... I fogod do dake my ayergy medicihe." (Oh, no. I forgot to take my allergy medicine.) I've translated the rest of her visit to

make it less painful.

I couldn't help but laugh slightly at the irony. Was it me? I really didn't know... To this day, I'm not sure. That's one of my little blessings (or curses, depending on how you look at it): I see the humor in almost everything. "Yes, love. It's me. Or at least I think it is. You'll see in a moment."

She sat nervously, pouring out a cup, sipping. A touch of fright crept into her voice. "Mhmmm... Raspberry. My favorite... You don't use this much, Felix. You're always making those Asian varieties. It's bad, isn't it?"

I nodded. It was true; I've always had some opposition to Western bastardizations of tea. "Well... Kate..." A pause hung in the air as I fished for the words I needed. "You know how I've been doing work with dogs?"

Her eyes grew suddenly. "One didn't attack you, did it? We need to get you to a doctor, then... give you rabies shots..."

"No, Kate. I've had the rabies shots. And everything else under the sun." I sighed. "It's a long story, really..."

She nodded me on, and my heart cracked. Even now, I wish there had been some easier way to break it to her. That had to be one of the most gut-wrenching moments of my life, up there with my Biochem 352 final and the day I heard that my first girlfriend had been hit and killed by a drunk driver.

"But what it ends with... is this." I raised my hands and slowly pulled my makeshift hood away.

There was a crash. The teacup had shattered against the table. Kate blinked at me, open mouthed. "Oh, Felix... You poor thing..." She stopped; more likely than not, she remembered my rather impish sense of humor. Or it could simply have been denial. "Wait a minute... How could this happen? You wouldn't test on yourself. What would you have been doing with that dog? It's not funny anymore, Felix. You can take the mask off now."

I shook my head slightly, taking her hands in mine, letting her feel the velvet-soft pads. Bringing them up to my face, I ran her fingers along the line of my jaw. "It's not a mask, Kate, as much as

I wish it was. It's my face now, from now until the day I die, unless I can find a way to reverse it. I doubt I'll be able to."

Kate seemed on the verge of tears. "It can't be, Felix... It's impossible."

She was right, so I told her the whole convoluted story, taking her into my cloaked arms, nuzzling at her neck. "See, Kate, the day after you took me out for my birthday, Jeremy gave me this weird book. He had no idea what it was. Well, it turned out to be a book of basic magic." I breathed a sigh of relief as she turned around, scratching me behind the ears. "One of the spells was supposed to join things together. Anyhow, my test dog knocked over a centrifuge and I was trying to fix it when he jumped up

on me... and... well..." I explained my findings in the lab.

By the end, she was sobbing into my shoulder, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, Felix... I just can't go on with it. I mean, I still care, really I do, but I can't do this." She looked at me, her big green eyes full of tears. "I could still be with you if you were hurt or scarred or something...

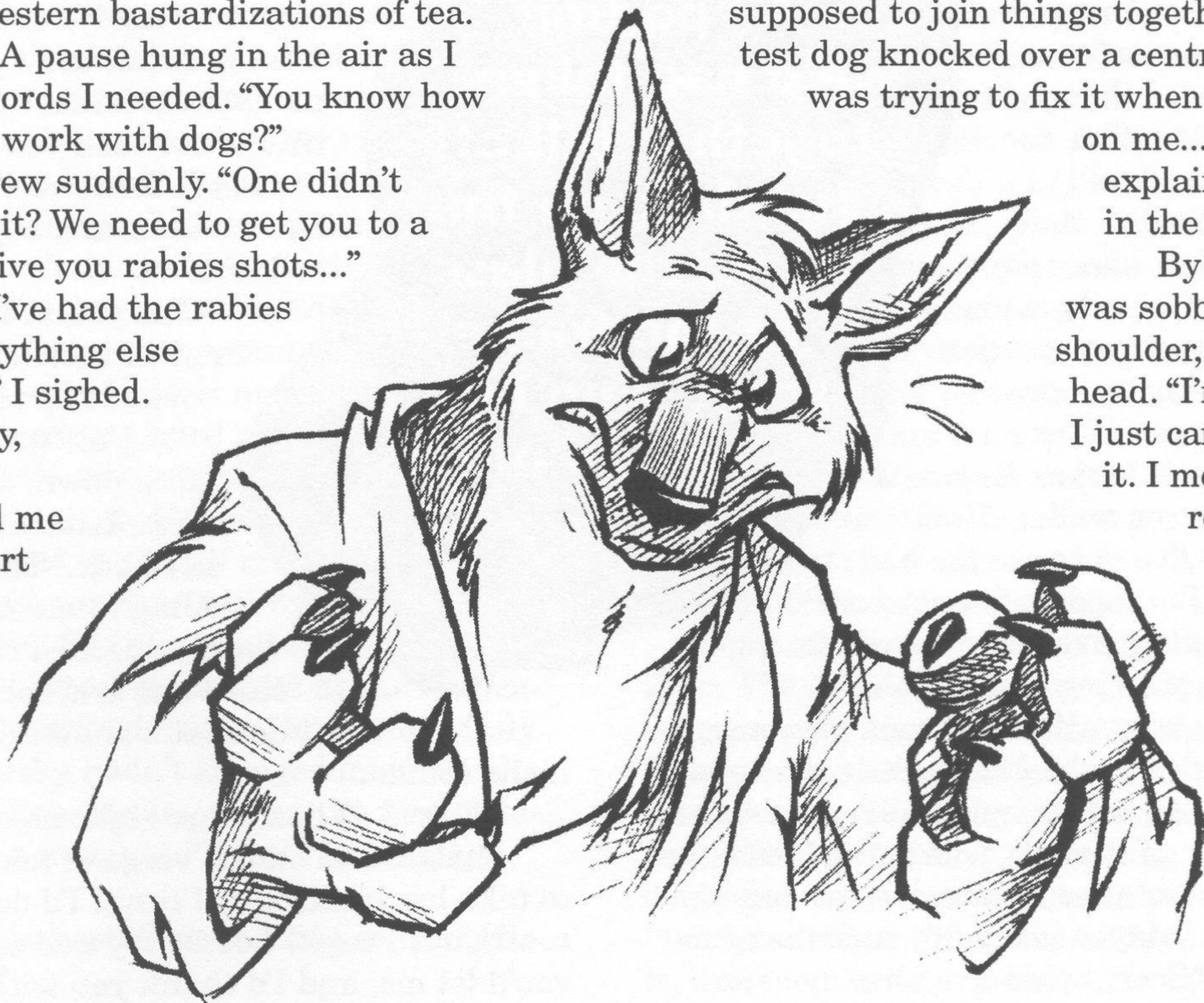
but you're not even human anymore, Felix. You're not even human anymore."



The words bit like asps, and I tried to protest, but she stopped me with a kiss on the cheek. "It's for the best, Felix. We were all meant to bear certain burdens... and I just can't deal with this one." She was silent for a moment. "Maybe we can still be friends?"

I was about to answer, when Laika decided on an outfit. She'd found an old pair of jean-cutoffs about half a size too snug, and put on a red button-down shirt Kate had given me once. They clung to her sensuously, accenting her features like the last fleeting moments of a schoolboy fantasy. Bursting through the door, she spun a few times for my approval and struck a pose. "Heya, Felix. Hi, Kate! How's this look on me?"

Before I go further, I suppose I should give



a short explanation of how this might've affected Kate. To begin, she's never been perfectly fond of Laika, partly because of her allergy, partly because Laika, being very affectionate, has the habit of jumping up on visitors—not good for Kate. My presence alone was probably already tearing her sinuses to pieces. Laika's presence probably made it worse. She's also been a touch jealous at times.

"Who's she?" Kate asked.

This, brings me to a pair of very important observations I've made. You'll see in a moment.

The first observation: Men... are stupid. I thought I'd told her about Laika, so I just came out and told her the (theoretically) obvious. "She... is what happens when Laika gets into the equation... my friend and companion of the past who-knows-how-many-years... lives with me. I thought you knew? Wakes me up beautifully, we go on walks..." You don't have to be Freud to see the bad subtexts there. To this day, I'm not sure what I was thinking. Probably the whole shock thing was starting to get to me.

The second observation: Women... are crazy. Something must've pushed her a little too far—the appearance of another humanoid canine, the misappropriation of her gift, a twinge of reflexive jealousy, or another allergic attack—because she exploded on me. "Maybe you don't need me after all," she hissed, "Seeing that I've already been replaced. Couldn't wait, could you, you horny little dog? Found someone else and changed her to be just like you, you freak? Couldn't wait to see if I'd still take you—wanted a little bit of cockbait right there?" If looks could kill, really, you'd be hearing this from a smoking crater in an apartment floor. There was that much malice in her voice.

I realized I hadn't explained about Laika, so I tried to explain, to calm Kate down.

"Don't even talk to me anymore, you... you... monster! You're going to be a circus sideshow the rest of your life, Felix. You hear me, a sideshow!" she shrieked, pulling her hand from mine. "And keep those filthy paws to yourself!" She stormed out, slamming the door. A portrait we'd had taken together fell off its place on the wall, the glass of the frame shattering into a million pieces.

Laika looked profoundly confused for a moment, then equally profoundly apologetic. "I'm sorry, Felix," she whimpered, her eyes begging for-

giveness as she knelt before me. "I didn't know... I didn't mean it."

I didn't answer her. I was too crushed. I just curled up into a little ball there on the couch and cried my eyes out.



The next morning, I woke to a familiar lapping. For one beautiful moment, all was fine, and I was human again. For one beautiful moment, it had all been a horrid nightmare. But I opened my eyes, saw Laika's nobly-lined face, felt her luscious body curled around mine, and came crashing back to reality. I got up wordlessly, and Laika followed. "I made breakfast... please, speak to me, Felix... I didn't mean to wreck things between you and Kate..."

I still didn't feel like answering. We sat down and began eating in silence.

"Can you at least let me know if there's some way I can make it up to you?"

Deliberately, I set my fork down, looking at her. "Yes, Laika. You can bring her back." The sadness was boiling in me now, boiling to a barely-checked rage.

Her voice cracked. "You know I can't do that... she'd kill me on sight if she could..."

I glared. "I don't care right now."

She seemed on the verge of tears, begging me to take her back. "But I can't! I'd do it if I could, really, but I can't! I could try and take her place, if you'd let me, and I'd thank you with all my heart, but I can't do that! Would you let me, Felix? I'd do the very best I can..."

That did it; I exploded. "Take her place? Laika, I've been with her since my Freshman year! That's not something you can just replace, like a bad sparkplug!"

She cowered in her chair, ears drooping. "But I've been with you all my life. And longer than you were with Kate."

"Look, Laika, you're my dog! I can't do that! You're my dog! It'd be like dating a horse!" Gesturing wildly, I hit the edge of my plate, sending it shattering against the wall. "Hell, I don't even like dogs! I hate them! I hate myself like this!" I paused, building a head of steam. "I should never have gone to Montana to begin with. Then I wouldn't have started any of this. I wouldn't have found any exceptions, I wouldn't have wanted one, I wouldn't ask my cousin for a pup, I wouldn't have brought you home, and NONE of this would

**A portrait
we'd had taken
together fell off
its place on the
wall, the glass
of the frame
shattering into a
million pieces.**

ever happen!"

Laika trembled, shaking as if each word were a separate knife into her heart. Tears streaming down her cheeks, matting the milky-white fur, she began unbuttoning her shirt, fumbling with the buttons. She took it off and folded it neatly, handing it to me. "Well... if that's how you feel..." She stood, sliding out of her shorts, handing them to me as well, and headed into the bedroom with the trudge of the condemned. Returning in a white bathrobe, she looked at me with teary eyes. "All I've ever wanted was to make you happy, Felix. If you don't want me... if it'll make you feel better at all... just drive me down to the vet, and maybe she'll put me to sleep. It'll be easier for everyone."

Touched by the trust she'd put in me, and the sheer power of her devotion, my rage spent itself. As slowly as I could, I got up, walking to my trembling husky, and clutched her tightly to myself. "No. I won't do that." I crouched slightly, kissing her on the cheek, tasting the salty tears, and inhaling her comforting, cinnamon scent. "I'm sorry for what I said. I didn't mean it... I was angry. I'm just having a hard time coping, Laika... I'm really sorry. I'll forgive you if you'll forgive me."

Liquid blue eyes studied me pensively, betrayed by a teasing glint of mischief lurking in their depths (and a certain tail wagging beneath my hand). For the first time since the ordeal began, my heart lifted, exhilarant at the realization of Laika's infinite devotion. My wonderfully irrepressible husky hadn't changed much at all. She stood on tiptoe, kissing me on the nose. "Deal." She paused for a moment. "I'd still like to try, though."

I struggled to keep from melting in the bliss. "Hmmm? Try?"

"To take Kate's place in your life."

"We'll see."



I went back into my blackbook and dug out my college roomie's phone number. He was a poli-sci major, so I figured that he'd know who could sort things out. He pointed me to the ACLU and PETA, "who would extend human rights to celery if they could figure out how," so I called them and argued back and forth for about an hour before they agreed that I could go down to one of their offices to confirm it. They said I could come over first thing Monday, which gave me the rest of the afternoon to really come to grips with my situation, and to play with Laika. After drawing a nice hot bath, I called a Chinese restaurant and had them deliver.

Besides tea, a good soak has to be one of the best ways to induce self-examination. The water bit into my skin as I slid into it, seeping into my

fur, the heat washing over my body like a summer breeze. It felt good, and I leaned back, resting my head against the cool tiles. Images of the last few days tore through my mind. The crash of broken glass echoed through my skull, playing over and over as the Shepard, jumped up on me, changing my life with his playful gesture. I saw the book exploding and felt the sudden rush of indescribable pain. Soft fur brushed over my fingertips, and the unforgiving hardness of bathroom tile slammed hard against my body. Laika grew from a friendly, demure dog to a beautiful, sensual... no. I couldn't think that way. That way lay madness.

I sat there, panting, for a few minutes, forcing myself to go further. Kate. More than anything else, I had lost Kate. Her words stung. *You're not even human anymore, Felix.* Almost physically hurt, I flinched, closing my eyes in pain. *Don't even talk to me... you... you... monster!* Fresh tears began to flow, dripping into the bathwater. *And keep your filthy... paws to yourself!* Sucking the thick, steamy air deep into my lungs, I roared, trying to blow my mind clear in the sweet oblivion of noise. *You're not even human anymore...* I looked over to the sink, saw myself in the mirror. I threw a heavy bottle of shampoo into it and sank back into the water, so that not even the gentle musical tinkling of broken glass could invade my misery.

I got out of the bath about twenty minutes later. The towel took forever, so I just settled for wrapping my hand in it and using the blow-drier. That worked much better and was something I really enjoyed, to tell you the truth. Warm air ruffling through fur isn't something you can really describe to someone who hasn't felt it. It's like... laying naked in soft grass with your lover, basking in that wonderful orgasmic afterglow as a warm breeze gently brushes over your skin. Explains why dogs like to stick their heads out the window when you're driving, doesn't it?

Ignoring the broken glass by the sink, I got my clothes and started dressing, threading my tail back through the tear it had caused. My head was throbbing, half from the pain, half from the sheer heat of the water. The doorbell rang, and a chill ran down my spine as I peered through the spyhole. How was I going to pay without showing myself to the delivery person?

I grabbed my wallet and stuffed enough money into an envelope to cover the meal and a generous tip. I slid it under the door. "Just leave the food there," I said. "The money's in the envelope."

The delivery guy was apparently pretty used to that.

Once he'd left, I opened the door and grabbed the food, setting it on the table and popping the Styrofoam containers open. I shoveled huge globs

of food onto two plates and dove into one of them, wolfing down my meal with barely-checked appetite (if you'll pardon the pun). Laika came over and joined me, eating more delicately. "I cleaned up the picture-frame, Felix," she murmured, breaking the silence. "I thought it was dangerous."

I thought about that for a moment. "Yes, I suppose it was... Too many cuts waiting to happen. Too many cuts waiting to be reopened."

She nodded. "The picture's in our room if you need it."

There was a brief pause as I thought about the whole situation. "No. It's in my room." Laika looked confused, so I continued. "I'm not going to sleep with you, and I'm certainly not going to be put out of my own bed. After all, I'm out most of my genetic code, my humanity, and my girlfriend; the least I can keep is some familiar surroundings." She was about to say something, but I cut it off with a preemptive look. After I finished eating, I went back into my room, unmounted the picture from the frame, and went out to tape it back beside the door. It just looked *right* there, reminding me of what I'd lost.

"Work," Sir Arthur Conan Doyle once wrote, "is the greatest cure for sorrow." I decided to test this theory, swept up the broken glass in the bathroom, and ordered a new mirror. That didn't take very long, so I sat in front of the computer and logged into my office, throwing myself in the wonderful oblivion of molecules and codons, of proteins and reactions and huge blocks of mind-numbing data. It took about an hour for me to realize that Laika was crouching behind me, watching over my shoulder as I worked. Just out of the familiarity of it all, I reached back and ruffled her behind the ears before going back to my data. Some things never change.

Some things do. "What do all those numbers and stuff mean?" she asked.

Explaining what you're doing always has the effect of reinforcing it in your own mind, so I've seldom minded it. This wasn't an exception, so I pulled a chair over to the table and began explaining. "This column of numbers here tells me what reactions different test subjects had, and this column tells me a lot of different breakdowns of what the first one means."

Somewhere along the line, I actually caught a mistake in a spreadsheet as I was explaining it to Laika. Suddenly, everything made that much more sense. It was still about as clear as sun-dried mud brick, but at least now, it was loosely-packed sun-dried mud brick. Between my own little bit of work and teaching Laika, the hours flew by.

As my little way of thanking her, I made bratwurst and veal for dinner—she'd always make a

special effort to steal those leftovers, so I figured she'd like them. Learning to use a knife took her a little while, but she enjoyed it, asking for seconds and thirds and wiping her plate with bread when it was all gone. Afterwards, I brushed my teeth, helped her brush her teeth, and got out a blanket and pillow for her to sleep on the couch. "We're going to have to wake up early tomorrow, Laika. I want to get to the ACLU office before people start coming out."

She nodded, brushing her fingers through my hair. "You're sure you don't want me to sleep in your room, Felix? You've never shut me out before, not when you were alone."

I nodded. "Yes, Laika. Now go to bed."

She curled up on the couch, reaching up to turn out the lights. I heard her tossing around, trying to get comfortable, then quiet as she found something acceptable. As I lay there in the still blackness, I couldn't help but hear things I'd never noticed before—the quiet hum of the refrigerator, the low, rumbling purr of the traffic outside, or the distant singing of a nightingale. Laika was right; it didn't feel quite right without her there. I shut the feelings out, though, and let the quiet symphony of background noise lull me to sleep.

The night wasn't easy, filled with unsettling dreams of delicious hours spent with Kate, who slipped away into the howling blackness, her words drawn out into a razor-sharp stiletto of sound, giving way to screaming masses throwing all manner of rocks and bottles at me. I flew kites on dreamy hills and saw the fur growing from my hands. Shocked, I dropped the roll of string, and my kite went flying off into infinity. Woods grew up around me, and, try as I might, I could not find my way out...



I woke to Laika's gentle lapping. The familiarity didn't hurt as much. Grogging myself awake, I looked outside. It was still dark, and raining hard. That was good. It provided a convenient excuse for raincoats, which I used to cover her and myself as much as I could. After a fast breakfast, we walked down to the garage and left for the ACLU building. Naturally, it hadn't opened when we got there, so we waited by the door in the garage. Something bothered me, so I started talking to her about it.

"Laika... You heard Kate come in, didn't you?"

Her ears drooped. She probably didn't like this topic very much, and I wouldn't blame her. "Yes... I did."

I thought for a moment. "Did you know that she has an allergy to dog hair?"

"Yes..." She looked at me, her eyes about to water. "But I thought she'd taken her medication, like she always does when she comes to see you." A

pause. "You can understand that, can't you?"

Slowly, I nodded, thinking it through. Kate had, after all. "Yes, Laika. I'm not angry over it. Don't worry. Things'll turn out, one way or the other."

We sat in the silent garage until the office opened to let us in.



It took longer than I expected to sort things out. None of the newbies were willing to touch the case. Volunteers called around different branches, trying to find someone willing to take the case. Nobody disputed that PETA wanted in, but nobody could figure out how to explain it to them. The "few minutes" they promised stretched into "an hour or so," and "an hour or so" stretched into "this afternoon." I called in sick to work, which really wasn't a lie—I was certainly in no shape to deal with the rigors of the job. Someone was nice enough to drive out and pick up lunch for us—they understood about us not being able to go out. As the hours rolled on, we got a few improvements. One volunteer got hold of a van with blackened windows that we could use, and another found discount alarms for the apartment, "in case of attack," he explained.

Somewhere around four in the afternoon, a lawyer came in to see me and introduced himself as Gary Schlomann, sitting down at the desk. He represented, it seemed, an actual team of lawyers that the ACLU had scrambled to assemble for my case. I told him my story, trying to omit nothing—last time I forgot something minor, my life went upside down. Screwing it up again wasn't going to help.

"So... you're telling me... that you somehow *magically* got fused with this dog. And that Miss Laika here..." he gestured, as if I didn't know who she was "got changed with you."

I nodded, but he kept on going, as if he were talking to himself. "No jury on earth is going to buy this... Especially your peers in the scientific community."

My hopes fell. "Isn't there some way I could prove it?"

He shook his head. "Not unless you actually had the book. Having it disappear is just too convenient."

"So you're telling me we're out of luck?" I'd never thought of myself as pessimistic, but the

runaround was getting to me now.

Mr. Schlomann ran his fingers down the lapel of his Armani. The damn thing probably cost more than I made in a good six months, and he was about to tell me I was hopeless. "I don't know. The ideal situation is that it never comes up at all. It isn't important how it happened. What's

important is that it did happen, and that you didn't have a choice in the matter."

I sighed. This was running around in circles. "So you can file something, hope it doesn't come up, get me the best offer I can, and I can get back to leading as close to a normal life as possible?"

"There isn't," he continued, "any real way we can just litigate and get you accepted."

perfectly normal. We're rather fortunate that you were human at one point;

we can say that, since human rights are theoretically unalienable, simply rearranging your genes doesn't change anything."

Laika spoke up; I think the whole impact of it had finally hit her. "What about me, Mr. Schlomann? Felix here has a leg to hop around on: he used to be human, at least. I think he still is, really. But what about me? I wasn't born human at all. They might call me some product or something. How can you take care of me, hmmm?"

He didn't have a convenient answer this time. "We'll do our best, Ms. Laika. That's all I can promise you."

Laika leaned into me, hugging, and started quietly crying on my shoulder.

"So there's nothing we can do right now."

"Oh, no. Nothing like that at all." He paused, for a moment, trying to come up with the easiest way to explain it. "Be seen in public as much as you can. Don't try to live like a hermit. The more people see you, the less threatening you become, and the easier this is going to be."

"Assuming I don't get shot first."

"Well, you're going to be put in a public spotlight in any case. Even if there isn't a case, the tabloids are going to pick up on this very quickly. I'd give them a week at longest. You run a much smaller risk if you act like you have nothing to hide and don't present yourself as a threat."

**"There isn't,"
he continued,
"any real way
we can just
litigate and get
you accepted."**

Closing time eventually came, and I drove home in the van, with Laika sitting quietly beside me. It was still raining.



The rain stopped by the next morning. Mr. Schlomann had told me to wait a few days for the legal team to fly in, so I left Laika with some money, the phone numbers of different delivery services, and the N64.

It was a long day. I walked into the lab as nonchalantly as I could, ignoring the stares, and worked until someone called Security on me. My retinas checked out, though, so they called in my boss, who was about as dumbfounded as Security. After about an hour of explanation, questioning, clarification, and "Look, boss, I don't know how it happened either. I honestly don't remember," she arrived at the conclusion... that she couldn't take responsibility for a conclusion, and would have to let senior management figure it out. Until then, she said, I was on "extended reduced-pay leave." Basically, they were paying me to stay out of their offices until they could figure out how to fire me.

I cleaned out my desk and labspace, loading the different pieces of my life into the van. Coffee mugs, the little potted catnip plant I'd taken a fancy to, pictures, my candy stash, a long-forgotten petri dish acting as host to a bacterial culture about to enter the Space Age, all went into that anonymous cardboard box, to be loaded into the van. The drive home was pretty quiet. It was raining again.

A few days passed, and I got a call from my boss. I was being let go, she told me, for 'negligence of safety procedures'. I should have restrained the dog, etc, etc, etc. Mr. Schlomann & Co. got started putting briefs together. They told me that I should read them, but I seldom did more than skim. After all, who but a lawyer can put together a six hundred page document and call it a brief?

The time flew by on wings of lead, as I holed up in the apartment as much as I could reasonably justify, ducking out to buy groceries, pick up mail, and little else. Laika got very good at Goldeneye. She also got restless; the long walks and park romps we'd enjoyed had become a thing of the past. "I need *exercise*, Felix..." she whined, "Sitting around in an apartment all the time isn't good for me." I tried to get out a little more, which helped somewhat.

People got lobbied; torts and huge sheaves of paper were FedEx'd around. It was all very confusing to me. As a geek, you see, the government exists out on the periphery, reaching in once in a while and saying, "No, you can't do that very interesting thing, because people will be angry." So for the most part, you shrug and move on to the

next interesting thing, and never really pay much attention to how it works. It did not help me here.

I decided to throw myself back at my work, and ordered a few thousand dollars worth of lab equipment. About a week later, half of the room was covered in racks of glitteringly smooth glass. I didn't have access to the heavy equipment at work anymore, and couldn't afford anything near it, so I called in favors from friends at universities and managed to get some results by mail. Syringe after syringe of blood came out of me as I toiled for a reversal of my condition, but it didn't matter. Nothing I did helped at all. After my friends started getting annoyed with repeated requests and couldn't offer any advice themselves, I started to give up on it in all but name, quietly tinkering in pursuit of that impossible fiction, just to keep my hands busy.

As often happens with weird social shifts, special-interest groups sprung up pretty quickly. One of them was devoted to protecting me and generally caring for my needs, and sent food, books, and the occasional courier to take care of me. Another random group of whackos (I imagine including the guy who first 'warned' me about the whole possibility) suggested all sorts of things to Laika and me, from marriage proposals to invitations to orgies and all kinds of sadomasochistic horrors. Most of them got summarily thrown into the shredder, and the more reasonable ones were politely declined.

But, naturally, not all of them were positive. One of them, Humanity First, set up protests outside my building, claiming that I didn't have any right to live in human society. All sorts of racist groups, as I'd predicted, started their usual round of threats, protests, and rallies. More than once, I'd been shot at through a window as I passed by. One shot zinged my ear, which hurt an awful lot and bled more, but wasn't actually dangerous, outside of its proximity to my head. It got horribly depressing.

I remember spending a lot of time in the bathtub, soaking my fears and worries away as best I could. My parents were very supportive, but I never figured out if it was because they were my parents, or if it was some remnant of that mellow all-accepting quality of Hippiedom. Maybe it was something in both. Dad came over to discuss philosophy an awful lot and to shout out the window at the crowd of marchers. He almost emptied a coffeepot out on them once when Humanity First and NextStep, a group who thought we were the 'next step' in human evolution, got into a particularly annoying shouting match. The anti-war protester in him never died, I think, and it took all of Laika's kind spirit and persuasion to keep him from

starting his own movement to get all the other protest groups tried for crimes against humanity (caninity?). Mom, on the other hand, sent lots of brownies, until she realized that I had a small problem with large quantities of chocolate, after which she started sending oatmeal raisin cookies, which, I suppose, was a better compromise.

My friends were a mixed bag. It was interesting, at least to me, that some of the most outwardly liberal were the first to go, while Jeremy was just incredibly apologetic, and some of the friends I'd thought the most conservative were actually the most accepting of all. One of them, I think, summed it up best: "Y'know... It's really not important to me. If you want me to make a big deal about the idea that you suddenly have an awful lot of body hair and some funky ears, hey, I'll do it. But to me, you're still the same Felix that bailed me out when Gary Thorne was coming to beat the crap out of me in fifth grade." That was touching.

The Chinese, it is said, have a curse, "May you live an interesting life." I must've offended at least one of that billion-and-change-member group of people, because mine got that way remarkably quickly.

In the next two months or so, there were four phases that really stuck out for me. The first one was about a week after the news broke... The tabloids had churned through, with rumors and wild speculation... now it was time for the 'real' press. Vanity Fair dropped in, and was obnoxious to the point that I just showed them the door and threatened to call Security on them. The other glossies were about as bad. US News was rather polite about it, so I tried to do the best I could. The report wasn't perfectly fair, but it was more than I imagined. WIRED was just bizarre; I think they have an unnatural attraction to copyrights or something. Who am I to have a stance on it? I just make things happen, and the legal department takes care of the details. The Journal was very nice about it, and I don't think I could have asked for more. Laika sat for the interviews with me, answering the occasional question and teasing, but generally being quietly supportive. Spurred on by the press coverage, the mail came thicker and faster, ranging from Purina wanting an endorsement, which I didn't even dignify with an answer, to threats, handed to the police, to invitations to speak at some bizarre sci-fi offshoot conventions, which were politely declined.

If I thought I had dealt with crackpots before, I was wrong. I'd only scratched the surface. To this day, I am convinced that every crackpot who had ever approached me before decided that I had done it on purpose and wanted me to play with his

genes now. After the first dozen, I just wrote up a form letter explaining that the process was highly intricate and reliant on extremely iffy conditions, and that I would not even consider it for less than some ungodly sum of money with at least seven zeroes before the decimal point. That shut them up nicely.

While I was out alone, taking a morning run one day (I ran with Laika in the evenings), I let my mind wander, not really paying attention to where I was going, and ended up in front of Kate's building. I felt a twitch of pain as I remembered that I wasn't welcome anymore, and looked up at her window for a while. I thought I saw the shades move just a touch, but it might have been the wind.

Hearings began, and the days settled quickly into a new, slightly-less-boring routine involving medical tests, interminable hours in court, and other minutiae. I learned to deal with Laika's playfully flirtatious manner, and generally managed to keep things in some semblance of order. Somewhere along the line, I stopped thinking of her as 'Laika-my-dog-in-human-form', but more as 'Laika-the-person-suffering-with-me'. That revelation tumbled its disturbing way through my mind as I slept. The next evening, I roused Laika after she'd turned in. "You're sleeping in the bedroom now."

"Oh! You're letting me back in?" Her tail wagged eagerly at the thought.

"No. It's your room now. You're the lady, you get it. I'll take the couch."

Laika looked at me plaintively. "But it isn't the bed... I wanna be with you..."

To be honest, I would've liked her there, too, if I could've kept myself from actually feeling her. It felt oddly lonely without her there. She'd been a comforting presence in my room since I first brought her home... but I couldn't do that. I gave her a stern look, and she walked into the room.

She kept the door open. I could hear her sleeping in there, which helped a little.

The next phase was the violence. About a week after the worst of the publicity, a Klansman (or at least we think he was a Klansman) managed to sneak into the basement with a baseball bat when I was doing my laundry. Doesn't really matter if he was a Klansman or not; he wasn't in a hood or anything. He just fit that kind of bill, a rough-shorn middle-aged man in backwoods dress with lots of cross-type pins. You know the type. I noticed him, but thought he was just another tenant, until I felt the dull, heavy crunch in my arm. He was winding up for another swing when I turned and hit him in the jaw. Laika, who was sorting clothes over in the corner, rushed over and tried to hold

him down. Five minutes or so later he was gone, and I called for an ambulance. Things were not looking good. The shots through my window had been one thing; a visible supply of bricks had quickly put a stop to that, and most people just aren't very good shots. Outside of the nick in my ear, nothing ever came of it but an increasing familiarity with window-company bills and a few pocks in my ceiling.

This one actually hurt me, and the stiffness in my arm reminded me for a long time.

There was a slight upside to my injury, though: getting babied by Laika. She brought me food, fluffed pillows, and generally wouldn't let me do anything but rest and do light computer work, hugging me comfortably every few minutes. I also learned why they put those cones on dogs with casts. If you ever thought that a cast itched on skin, try it over skin that normally has fur on it. The feeling is worse than sitting on sandpaper. Laika and Dad had to hide all the heavy, blunt objects after they found me trying to smash the cast open one morning.

I bumped into Kate at the supermarket by accident. There were a lot of things I wanted to say to her, but the words wouldn't come. She must have felt the same way, because we just stood there in the ice cream isle for a few minutes, staring at each other in awkward silence. Eventually, we just mumbled 'hi' and parted ways.

One night, I dreamed. Scenes of running from white-hooded hordes faded into blackness, and melted away, leaving the thick scent of worry. I was back in Kate's arms. She was holding me close as I slept, whispering quiet soothing words, nuzzling that deliciously sensitive spot behind my right ear. "It's Ok... you're safe, Felix... You're safe."

"I thought... left," I mumbled, half asleep. "Why're you here?"

She hushed me and laughed a little, her voice soft and breathy. "You sounded like you could use it... And I missed sleeping with you... and I couldn't resist." She rolled over on top of me, pressing her face to my neck, inhaling deeply.

Inhaling. In fur.

I woke with a start, and found a bathrobed Laika sitting on the sheets, nuzzling as I'd imagined Kate. "Laika? What are you doing out here?"

"Just cuddling," she explained, resting against my chest, whimpering as she'd done before The

Accident. "Missed sleeping with you. Didn't think you'd mind."

I was too tired to argue, so I let her, as long as there was as sheet between us. She took my arm and put it around her waist, dozing nicely, and I soon followed.

I got very used to her presence and actually grew to enjoy it, particularly as we moved back into the bedroom a few nights later. That disturbed me, but Jeremy laughed it off when I brought it up a few days later. "Dude... Sheet or no sheet, you get to sleep every night with a drop-dead gorgeous woman who doesn't mind about your condition and cares very much about you. I would shut up and enjoy it."

That took some getting used to. I started opening up a bit more to Laika, letting her be more a part of my life, bickering playfully from time to time.

"You two act like you're married sometimes," Dad remarked once.



About two weeks after that, I was sitting in my living room, nursing my broken arm, when Dad noticed that the groups of protesters had shrunk. The third phase had begun.

I started to become Yesterday's News (TM), as people started learning that I was more or less harmless and just wanted to be left alone, and the case started winding down. People stopped crossing the street when I came near and didn't mind introducing their children to me. Some even got kind of protective, almost as if they were proud to know me.

"Hey, Felix... How's it going? Fine? Cool... Any trouble with the fanboys lately? Let me know if I can help you out with something, a't?"

Or they'd get into friendly scruffles with me as we passed in the street. It took a while to get used to being rubbed behind the ears as a gesture of affection; you really can't do that to a human, and it's a very unique feeling. It's like... a hug, but not quite. It's like a stolen kiss from a high school sweetheart, lingering for a fleeting moment between classes, a sort of warm, innocent pleasure. Things like that take time to understand. I was starting to get the hang of washing fur out and drying it without knotting, and it wasn't as hard to go out to buy groceries and such anymore. Laika and I went out more often for entertainment and food. It still hurt, though, when I looked in the mirror, or when I looked up and saw the picture of

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Kate. Memories sting for a very, very long time.

To this day, I'm not sure if it got better or worse when Kate finally called and apologized for what she'd said. She asked if we could be friends again, and I told her I'd consider it, and that we'd have to see. Then she asked to talk to Laika. I hesitated, but gave the phone over, figuring that it'd be best.

"Kate told me to take care of you," she explained afterwards.

The fourth was much more distinct. I suppose it could really better be called an event than a phase. About two months after it all started, I took Laika out for dinner at one of my favorite pubs, as a sort of celebration for getting my cast off. I remember her treating it like a very big deal, getting a very elegant dress for it and spending an hour or so preparing. She looked great, and I had to deal with some good-natured ribbing from the guys. But that was fine.

I'm going to skip most of the details, but I'll say that after six or seven German lagers, I wasn't in any shape to drive, and the catcalls from the bar were rolling around my head rather perversely. Laika helped me into the apartment, laying me down on the couch, and stepped into the bedroom to change, but I snuck in as she was stepping out of her dress. Pressing up against her, I held her close, whispering. "So... *would* you like doggy-style, or do you prefer something else?"

She pushed me away gently, laughing. "You're drunk, Felix. Don't do anything you'd regret."

"I mean it, though... You're sweet, sexy, and you've been sleeping with me for the past month..." I kissed playfully at her neckfur. "And besides, I thought you wanted to fill Kate's shoes? You've done most of it... only a little left now."

She pushed me away, firmly enough to knock me back onto the bed. "I don't want to be Kate's replacement anymore, Felix. I've learned more than that." She turned away from me, crossing her arms over her chest. "I want you to like me because of who I am."

It took a few minutes for that to swim through my lagered mind. "Well, I love your loyalty, Laika...

you've been with me forever... even when I didn't really deserve to have you." My train of thought derailed, and it took me a few minutes to put it back on track. "I don't know where I'd be without you... and I really do think you're beautiful."

I got back up and hugged her again, pressing my hips against hers. "And I really do want to know."

A slow lick along the edge of her ear turned her around again, and she looked up at me, her eyes glittering. "I actually don't know if I prefer doggy-style, Felix... Why don't you find out?"

She did. To tell the truth, so did I.

I remember going a little crazy that night, just from the whole feel and smell and taste of her, but, from her cute, yelping groans of delight, I suspect she didn't mind at all.

The warm first rays of sunshine woke me the next morning, finding my arms firmly wrapped around Laika's sleeping body, her soft-furred cheek resting on my shoulder. I didn't want to disturb her, so I just lay there, thinking. Suddenly, it didn't matter anymore. Cases could go settle themselves. Society marched on. I could get another job. I had food, a place to stay, and a beautiful woman in my arms. What more did I need?

I took down the pictures of Kate later that morning.



This story is dedicated to Evette McKinney, to whom I wish the very best, regardless of what she wishes to me.

It is also dedicated to Max Blackrabbit, who, in his perfectly innocent, unknowing way, is largely responsible for introducing me to this whole furry mess to begin with. If you like this story, give him some credit. If you don't, it's entirely my fault.

—A.L.



